THOMAS MERTON AND SOCIETY: A STUDY OF THE MAN AND HIS THOUGHT AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

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Dennis Quentin McInerny

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PREFACE

A doctoral dissertation represents for most of those who write one the first attempt to produce a book-length work. Apart from the traumas such an endeavor involves, it has the effect, while in process, of making one acutely aware of one's intellectual dependence, and, in the aftermath, of engendering a deep gratitude to all who helped along the way. I would like to preface this study by acknowledging my sincere gratitude to those good helpers.

If a year ago I tended to take librarians for granted, the competent and prompt assistance I continually received from those at the University of Minnesota and the College of St. Thomas has developed in me a new respect for their profession and the skill with which they practice it. I am especially indebted to Mrs. Patricia Oliver and Mrs. Martha Schuhmann, curators of the Thomas Merton Room in the library of Bellarmine-Ursuline College, Louisville, Kentucky. Everyone at Bellarmine was most kind and hospitable, but these two ladies went out of their way to make my research there as profitable and pleasant as possible.

Three other people in Louisville were very generous with their time and knowledge: Father John Loftus, O.F.M., Conv., vice president for academic affairs at Bellarmine-Ursuline; Father Daniel Walsh, who taught Merton philosophy at Columbia; and, Mr. Ron Seitz, poet and professor of English at Bellarmine-Ursuline. These men had in common a close friendship with Merton, and each kindly consented to be interviewed; I gained from them insights and information that no amount of reading or research could have provided.

Sister M. Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S. gave me complete access to her rich collection of unpublished material. Not only did she lend me every assistance while I was doing research in Milwaukee, but she entrusted to my care several invaluable manuscripts so that I might return them to Minneapolis and there work on them at my leisure. She also generously supplied me with extra copies of whatever material she had on hand.

It was my sad misfortune never to have met Thomas Merton personally. I have nothing but the fondest memories of him, however, for the good-natured cooperation he displayed toward this project. His magnanimity was without compare. Besides answering quickly and completely whatever questions I asked of him, he mailed without request two hefty packets of published and unpublished material and a copy of one of his latest books--all of which, needless to say, was very helpful. Even though my contact with him was from afar, I gained the distinct impression that I was dealing with a man of a special kind of goodness. Since Father Merton's death, I have found in his secretary, Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., the same kind of generosity and cooperation, and to him I owe much.

Professor Mulford Q. Sibley of the University of Minnesota was the advisor for this project, and I wish to thank him for his moral support as well as for his expert technical assistance. He was always available for consultation, and his advice was always good. Finally, special thanks are due to Mrs. Bernice Berg, for few typists could have shown the patience and skill with my eccentric manuscripts as did she.

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INTRODUCTION

"One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society," Thomas Merton once wrote, "comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask."[1] Thomas Merton was a man outstanding for his lack of fear of asking questions--about himself, about the monastic life, about his church, about his society. He was not always sure of his answers; indeed, he was not always sure of his questions. But these were surmountable difficulties attached to a commitment which, as a human being, he felt it impossible to evade: the search for truth. Merton's was a scintillating example of the "examined life," the only life, Socrates has assured us, which is worth living.

This is a study of Merton's social thought, that is, in essence, a study of the questions which Merton asked about the society in which he lived, and the answers which he formulated for those questions. As such, it will not be a very neat study, for in a way which I hope to make clear as _I_ proceed through this dissertation, Merton was not a very neat thinker. By which I mean that he did not (exceptions to be discussed) think architectonically; he did not combine his ideas on a given subject into a construction of arguments which moved systematically from premises to conclusions, which is to say simply, and quite unpejoratively, that he was more a poetic thinker than a philosophic one. He was guided more by the flame of intuition than by the frame of the syllogism.

For these reasons, there is not a separate body of Merton's writings which can be set aside and labeled his "social thought." To be sure, Merton did devote certain essays and poems, even books, to what broadly can be called social subjects, but his reflections on society--sometimes encompassed in a line or in a sentence, sometimes in paragraphs--are to be found scattered throughout the impressive body of his works, and all of these must be consulted if one is to determine, not only the substance of his social thought, but the pattern of its development as well. But, though Merton himself never developed in writing a finished comprehensive statement of his thoughts on society, these thoughts do compose, once gathered from their various sources, a fairly unified body of ideas. It is this body of ideas to which I shall be referring throughout this study as Merton's "social thought."

One of the many key characteristics of Merton's social thought, one which is especially important, is the part played within it by the relationship between the individual and society. Without becoming a shibboleth, the individual eventually assumed for Merton a dignity--even a sacredness--which made the concept central to his thought. But the individual was a dignified, free, integral being not in spite of society but because of it. The first, the individual person, was balanced with the second, society, and the identity and dignity of one depended upon the other. The person was informed and dignified with full humanness by reason of his conscious relationship to mankind as a whole, the special worth of which latter was ultimately explained in religious terms in that it was the Mystical Body of Christ. In addition to this, however, society could be considered something concrete--hence meaningful--in sociological terms only in so far as it was considered a collection of individuals; elsewise, "society" was but an innane abstraction. One of the more interesting aspects of Merton's social thought is the manner in which he vacillated between an emphasis upon _the individual as part of society_ and upon _society as composed of individuals_. The distinction is not a trite one, as suggested by the fact that, in another context, it might well serve to illustrate the difference between a political conservative and a political liberal.

My main concern in this study will be to describe and analyze Merton's social thought. The first three chapters will be mostly, but not exclusively, descriptive. In chapter one, delineating the "early period," I will trace the development of Merton's social thought from its beginnings up to what I refer to in chapter two as his "mature period." There were two general stages to his early thought: that pertaining to his undergraduate years at Columbia University when he was an enthusiastic, if not profound, advocate of socialism, and that pertaining to the period covering the years immediately following his conversion to Catholicism and his early years as a monk. The first stage, primarily for the sake of convenience, I refer to as his "Communist stage"--a label which, as will be seen, has more than simply metaphorical pertinence. I refer to the second stage as the "conversion stage." Paradigmatically, it can be said that in the early period of his social thought, characterized by these two stages, Merton moved from an attitude of worldliness to one of unworldliness.

Chapter two is devoted to a discussion of Merton's "mature" social thought, by which description I intend two things. The first meaning of the term is simply designatory, and the intention is to identify by it that stage of Merton's social thought which obtained in the latter years of his life. The second meaning of the term is qualitative, and I intend to indicate by it that Merton's social thought had reached a degree of ripeness and balance which it had not displayed during earlier stages. I have no intentions of claiming, however, that Merton's social thought was, in this final period, a finished intellectual product, for it was not. By comparison, it was relatively stable--Merton had by this time clarified much of his thought on society and removed from them some of the more glaring incongruities--but it was far from polished. Merton had not definitely made up his mind about several issues touching society. He was not certain, for example, of the exact nature of the relationship between the individual and the larger community. On the other hand, Merton was the type of thinker who leads one to conjecture that he would never have arrived at a stage where his opinions on society would have been fixed once and for all. His ideas, he once said, "are always changing, always moving around one center, always seeing that center from somewhere else."[2] At any rate, Merton's social thought as manifested during his mature period represented a return to the general orientation of the first stage of his early period. To complete the paradigm mentioned above, it can be said--to illustrate with broad strokes--that the whole spectrum of Merton's social thought represented a move from worldliness (Communist stage), to unworldliness (conversion stage), back to worldliness (mature period), with this important qualification: that the second worldliness was considerably different from the first.

There is no better way, it seems to me, of understanding a man's generalities than by understanding how he deals with particulars. For this reason, in chapter three I turn from a discussion of the broader aspects of Merton's social thought to a discussion of his dealings with two specific social issues, war and race. The choice of these two subjects was not arbitrary, but based on the fact that they were the two issues which Merton himself considered most crucial to his times, and to which he devoted the greatest amount of his total writing on social subjects.

Chapter four represents a switch of emphasis in this study. Whereas in the first three chapters I devoted my attention primarily to Merton's social thought, in the final two chapters I emphasize Merton the social thinker. This emphasis upon the man will involve a concentrated effort to see Merton in the light of certain cultural and historical contexts. In chapter four in particular I attempt to explain much of the confusion in Merton's social thought--a confusion revolving around a central tension between the polar concepts of individualism and communitarianism--by showing that this confusion is the logical expression of two personae within Merton, personae with which he had to abide for most of his mature life. I am arguing that there were, metaphorically, two Mertons--Merton the poet and Merton the priest. Merton the poet inclined toward individualism: Merton the priest, toward communitarianism. There was therefore set up in his life, and consequently within his writings, a tension between two opposite tending drives. By and large, this tension was constructive rather than destructive, for it lent a special richness--the richness born of the constant examination of one's own intentions--to Merton's thought and writing. It was a tension in which the two forces did not always maintain the same relation one to another. At times it was imbalanced in favor of the poet; at times, in favor of the priest. In Merton's Communist stage it was Merton the priest, that is, the communitarian, who was to the fore; in the conversion stage the poet prevailed. Finally, though allowing for many fluctuations, and the generally unfinished nature of Merton's social thought already alluded to, there was in his mature period a balance struck between the poet and the priest. It was then that Merton came to grips with the idea that the individual and society do not contradict one another but in fact complement one another.

In the final chapter of this study I focus upon what I will refer to broadly as the philosophical underpinnings of Merton's social thought, in particular, of his resolution, tenuous though it might have been, of the problems involved in the relationship between the individual and society. This will involve an examination of one of the key elements of Merton's life and thought, solitude. Solitude had a special significance for Merton, not the least of which--certainly the most paradoxical--was that he considered it the _sine_ _qua_ _non_ means by which the individual person cemented his bonds of affinity with his fellow men. Solitude was the gateway to community. In this connection, and because it is an unavoidable subject--given the character of Merton's personal life and the cosmic nature of some of his social commentary--I end this chapter, as well as the study, with a discussion of Merton's mysticism.

Merton was a poet literally as well as metaphorically, and because his poetry has special significance for his social thought, I have considered it expedient to give special attention to his poetry in this study. I could have done so in one lump sum, as it were, but it seemed better for the over-all continuity of the work to break up the discussion. At the end of chapter one I discuss the poetry which nicely corresponds to the development of Merton's social thought discussed in that chapter. Honoring a crude but functional division I make of Merton's writings (early and late), at the end of chapter two I discuss his later poetry which corresponds with, and illustrates, the characteristics of Merton's mature social thought to which that chapter is devoted. In chapter four I deal with questions of the quality of Merton's poetic art.

In his impressive work, The Great Chain of Being, Arthur O. Lovejoy stated that there were always "implicit or incompletely explicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation."[3] These "assumptions" and "mental habits" to which Lovejoy refers are, in effect, the result of the constant impingement of a man's culture--the complex package of principles and prejudices offered up by his social milieu--upon his intellectual life. As stated, my primary concern in this study is to examine Thomas Merton's thoughts on society. To do so, however, without being conscious of the ineluctable truth that Merton was a part of the society upon which he reflected, that his thoughts were informed by that society, would be to tell only part of the story. It will also be my task, therefore, to demonstrate how Merton's thoughts were a reflection of the American culture in which--though not in all ways in the main stream--he was very much a participant.

It is another illustration of the proverbial two-way street. Merton, particularly as a religious figure whose writings commanded a national audience, was a significant contributor to at least one aspect of the American cultural scene. According to Winthrop S. Hudson, he was, along with Fulton J. Sheen, a major symbol "of the post-World War II religious revival among Roman Catholics."[4] On the other hand, we detect in the developmental stages of Merton's social thought, and in its mature status, certain indices which show that Merton was the product of, as well as being a contributor to, American culture. Throughout this study I will be pointing to these indices so that in the end Merton will be seen, not *in vacuo*, but within the context of the cultural construct to which he belonged.

This study of Merton's social thought is founded primarily upon his published, and secondarily upon his unpublished, writings. I have made a conscious effort, however, to base my conclusions upon sources other than those strictly literary, not the least of which has been the life of Merton. In putting together a work which one hopes might prove to be a contribution, however small, to the general field of scholarship, one has to take care, in analyzing the subject of the study, that he weigh what that subject does, how he lives, as carefully as he weighs what he says and writes. Unless one subscribes to the thesis that there exists in the normal man an unbridgeable gap between his intellectual life and his moral life (between his thoughts and his actions)--which I do not--then one must take into account the total life picture. The New Critics are no longer new, and we have come to realize that, even in the analysis of purely literary works, the biography of the author is among the things which must be considered if the analysis is to be complete. Because many facets of Merton's biography play an important part in my study, and because some readers may not be familiar with his life, I should like to preface the study with a short biographical sketch of the man to whom it is devoted.

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France, a small town in the Pyrenees a few miles from the Spanish border. He was the son of a New Zealander father and an American mother. His father, Owen Merton, was an accomplished but not widely known painter, although during the course of his relatively short career he had held exhibitions in London and New York which had received favorable notices. He was prominent enough in his native land to have been, in 1930, the subject of a special issue of Art in New Zealand.[5] Merton's mother was also an artist--she had met her husband while studying art in Paris--but after her marriage she apparently did not devote to it much time. Ruth Jenkins Merton was from Long Island, the daughter of parents who were strong pacifists.[6]

Merton's education was extremely diversified. His schooling began in New York, where his parents had moved about a year after his birth to avoid the Great War. After his mother died, in 1921, Merton accompanied his father as he traveled about seeking inspiration for his art, and, besides significant informal education gotten from him, received further formal elementary schooling in Bermuda and France. Merton was a student at the Lycee de Montauban, France during 1927 and 1928, and in 1929 he moved to England to begin his college preparatory training at Oakham School, where he was a student until 1932. He was awarded an exhibition to read modern languages at Cambridge, and was admitted to Clare College in the fall of 1933. Merton spent one, rather unhappy, year in the "dark, sinister atmosphere of Cambridge."[7] His father died in 1930, and because of Merton's somewhat unillustrious academic performance, his guardian suggested that it would be best if Merton abandoned his plan of entering the British Diplomatic Service, which he had vaguely intended doing after completing Cambridge. It would be well if he moved to America and lived with his maternal grandparents.[8]

In 1934 Merton came to live permanantly in this country. His first intention was to enroll in the New School of Social Research, but a second thought led him to Columbia University.[9] Majoring in English literature, he received his B.A. there in 1938. A year later he received an M.A., also in English, and for a year further, while he was an instructor in the Columbia University Extension, he continued his studies as a doctoral student.

Merton's years at Columbia, especially as an undergraduate, were charged with activity, much of which was extracurricular. In his first year he was a member of the Communist Youth League and participated enthusiastically, though briefly, in activities connected with that organization. He was a fraternity man as well as an athlete, although with respect to the latter he did not allow his membership on the cross country team to interfere with his smoking and drinking habits.[10] He was most involved in writing. By his second term at Columbia Merton was working for four school publications, The Spectator, The Columbia Review, along with John Berryman, Jester, and the yearbook. He eventually became editor of the yearbook and art editor of Jester. Merton's talents as a writer were acknowledged in his senior year by his being selected the best writer of his class. The citation he received from the president of the university noted that his writing proved him to be "as light-hearted as he was grave"--[11] a description as applicable to Merton at the end of his life as it was as a college student.

Merton went to Columbia with the general idea of taking a degree in some phase of the social sciences. Despite his natural inclination toward art and literature he had decided to avoid these disciplines for fear that they would dull his recently acquired social consciousness, they being "too bourgeois" for his "serious and practical new self."[12] Two things caused him to change his mind on this matter. The first was his meeting Mark Van Doren, who was to become a life-long friend. Not only did Van Doren revivify Merton's faith in literature as something eminently worth studying, but, on a larger plane, he helped Merton produce his "own explicit ideas."[13] Further, "the influence of Mark's sober and sincere intellect . . . was remotely preparing my mind to receive the good seed of scholastic philosophy."[14] The second thing, which he felt was also attributable in part to Van Doren's influence, was Merton's becoming disillusioned with Communism, the commitment to which had produced his "serious and practical new self." He came to believe that Communism was not in fact capable of doing the things for society it said it could.

In 1938 Merton became a convert to the Catholic Church. A number of things had led up to this. His disenchantment with Communism implied a reevaluation of what had been his generally negative views regarding religion. Though maintaining a negative attitude toward the role often played by religious groups in history, Christianity in particular, he came to see that the theory was not necessarily corrupt because of the corruption of the practice, especially if the connection between theory and practice was virtually non-existent. Merton came to the conclusion that there was a hidden, spiritual order of things, to which truly religious men adhered, and which was quite apart from--often contradictory to--formal religious institutions. This did not make the institutions evil, but it underlined the fact that they were far from infallible. The variability of the institution depended upon its faithfulness to the spiritual order. Merton owed a great deal to William Blake, on whom he wrote his Master's thesis,[15] for the reformulation of his views on religion. It was also partially through Blake that he became interested in mysticism, both Eastern and Western, an interest which was never to cool, and which at that time probably had not a little to do with his eventual decision to become a monk.

There was an intensely intellectual side to Merton's conversion. His formal introduction to scholastic philosophy under Professor Daniel Walsh, among other things, forced him to reexamine his thinking concerning the existence and nature of God. As part of his philosophic training Professor Walsh put him to work on a two year project of reading Aristotle's Metaphysics.[16] The most influential work to which he was exposed, however, was Etienne Gilson's The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. It was through this book that Merton became acquainted with the concept of aseity, as descriptive of the nature of God. It was the understanding of this concept, he said, which made him see for the first time that it was possible to be both an intellectual and a religious believer.[17]

Following his conversion, Merton began to revamp all of his plans, especially those pertaining to his studies at Columbia. In 1939 he arrived at the conclusion that his true calling was to become a priest, and with that intention applied, and was accepted, for admission to the Franciscan Order. At the eleventh hour, however, just a few weeks before he was scheduled to enter the novitiate, he changed his mind, for reasons which he himself was not able fully to explain. In a state of moral confusion--it was as if his moorings had been cut and he was adrift on a sea of ambiguities--he applied for a position as instructor of English at St. Bonaventure's University, a Franciscan administered institution in Olean, New York. Merton taught at St. Bonaventure's during 1940 and 1941, and it was while there, in the then quiet, idyllic atmosphere of that upstate campus, that he came to terms with himself. Professor Walsh had spoken to him enthusiastically about a retreat he had made at the Trappist monastery in Kentucky, and in the spring of 1941 Merton made a retreat there himself. It was to prove to be for him a crucially important experience. From a disapointed conviction that he was not cut out for a religious vocation, Merton began to wonder if he had been wrong; perhaps he did have a very special vocation, to become a Trappist monk. The thought thrilled him and frightened him simultaneously. After months of agonizing deliberation, during which he also seriously considered going to live in Harlem as a settlement house worker, he entered Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, near Bardstown, Kentucky, on December 9, 1941.

Once Merton entered the monastery, the "events" of his life were conspicuous for their scarcity. In 1947 he made his solemn profession of vows, which meant that, having given the monastic life a sufficient trial, he decided to bind himself to it for life. In 1949 he was ordained a priest. In 1951 he became a United States citizen, among the reasons for which, he said later, were people like Thoreau and Emily Dickinson.[18] Merton served as the Master of Students, the spiritual director of the monks studying for the priesthood, from 1951 to 1955, and in 1955 he was appointed to the key post of Master of Novices, as such becoming the man responsible for the guidance and instruction of the new candidates for the monastic life. This was an especially significant job given the large influx of candidates which Gethsemani received at this stage of its history. Among the many "booms" which this country experienced during the 1950's, one, perhaps the least known, was the monastic boom.[19] Merton held the position of Master of Novices until 1965.

According to one of his closest friends, Merton was several times sought after by various Cistercian monasteries to serve as abbot, but in every case he turned down the offer.[20] Merton had made up his mind that an abbacy was something for which he had neither inclination nor ability.[21] In January, 1968 the abbot of Gethsemani retired and an election was held to select his replacement. To forestall the possibility of his election--which was far from remote--Merton circulated a humorous but adamant letter among his fellow monks announcing his non-candidacy for the office. He was not elected.[22]

The really dramatic events of Merton's life after he entered the monastery were literary. Ironically, when he became a monk Merton had decided that he would give up writing. We have chiefly to thank Abbot Frederic Dunne, Merton's superior at Gethsemani, for not only talking him out of that resolve but for actively encouraging him to write. Merton's most famous book, his fourth, was published in 1948. The Seven Storey Mountain catapulted him into national prominence, and made his name almost a household word among many American Catholics. The book sold well over 300,000 copies in 1949 and ended by being third on the year's non-fiction best seller list.[23] Despite an awesome prolixity since, no book has enjoyed the popularity of The Seven Storey Mountain, and in many ways--though Merton himself did not believe this[24]--no book was better. At the time of his death Merton had published over forty books, plus dozens of articles and contributions to books written or edited by others.

It was, by his own admission, too large a corpus. He described himself once, with characteristic humor, as "the author of more books than necessary."[25] But not only was he concerned that he had written too much, he also felt that some of his writings, expecially his early writings, formed the basis for a stereotype into which he was placed and which inhibited his audience in later years. "Some early work," he claimed, "resulted in my being classified as a "spiritual writer," or, worse still, an "inspirational writer," a category to which I seriously object."[26] The categorization, Merton thought, had the effect on many people that they were tuned to expect only certain things from the ascetic recluse of the Kentucky hills, and when they heard the unexpected--such as opinions on war and race--they either turned him off, or reacted violently as against one who had abandoned his vocation to contemplation. If indeed it was an unfortunate categorization, it was also, as Merton admitted, one he had "perhaps not worked hard enough to avoid."[27]

In 1961 Merton received the Columbia University Medal for Excellence. Two years later he was awarded the Pax Medal by the Massachusetts Political Action for Peace. Also in 1963 he was honored by the university of his home state when the University of Kentucky granted him an LL.D.

Not very long after his coming to Gethsemani Merton began thinking of leaving, not to abandon the life of a monk--he said that he never seriously entertained that thought for more than five or ten minutes[28]--but to seek out a monastic life which afforded even more solitude than the Cistercian Order could provide. Once he had resolved the question whether or not he should join the Carthusians, by deciding to remain at Gethsemani, Merton's aspirations for a more secluded life were given a different direction. He began to argue for the restoration of the eremitical tradition within his own order, and he was eventually given permission, at first on an experimental basis, to spend part of his time in a hermitage on the monastery grounds, about a mile from the main buildings. In August, 1965 he began living the hermit's life on a full time basis and continued doing so until the end of his life.[29]

Except for very occasional trips for medical reasons to Louisville, fifty miles away, Merton never left Gethsemani between the time of his entrance in 1941 and the final year of his life, 1968. All the more significant, therefore, was his decision to embark upon an extended trip to the Far East in the fall of that latter year. He had been asked to attend a meeting of the abbots of Catholic monastic orders in Asia as well as an inter-faith meeting of various Asian religions. "I will also," he wrote in a letter sent to friends before his departure, "be spending some time in at least two Asian monasteries of our Order, to help out there, and will doubtless be invited to others. . . . And I hope this will enable me to get in contact with Buddhist monasticism and see something of it first hand."[30]

Merton died in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968, by accidental electrocution according to best available information.[31] His body was returned to Kentucky and buried in the cemetary which, years before, had figured in his elegy, "The Trappist

Cemetary--Gethsemani." The words which he once addressed to his predecessors could now be addressed to him.

> You need not hear the momentary rumors of the road
> Where cities pass and vanish in a single car
> Filling the cut beside the mill
> With roar and radio,
> Hurling the air into wayside branches
> Leaving the leaves alive with panic.[32]

NOTES

[1] Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island (New York, 1955), p. xiii.

[2] From the unpublished Journal of Thomas Merton, Bellarmine-Ursuline College library, Louisville, Kentucky.

[3] Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (New York, 1936, Harper Torchbook edition), p. 7.

[4] Winthrop S. Hudson, Religion in America (New York, 1965), p. 405.

[5] Art in New Zealand, Vol. II, No. 8 (June, 1930), "The Owen Merton Issue;" also see in that issue James Shelley's, "Owen Merton, R.B.A."

[6] Ibid., p. 232.

[7] Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York, 1948), p. 118.

[8] Ibid., p. 126. Although Merton did not apply himself very assiduously while at Cambridge ("After the Easter vacation, I was called in to my tutor to explain why I was not attending most of my lectures, and a few other things besides.", Ibid., p. 125), he did pass the first part of the Modern Language Tripos in French and Italian, getting a second in both. He was planning to return to Cambridge the following year.

[9] Ibid., p. 136.

[10] Ibid., p. 157.

[11] From an unpublished document in the private library of Sister M. Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S., Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

[12] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 138.

[13] Ibid., p. 139.

[14] Ibid., p. 140.

[15] "Nature and Art in William Blake."

[16] Daniel Walsh, "Thomas Merton and Philosophy," lecture delivered in February, 1967 at Bellarmine College, unpublished tape recording in Bellarmine-Ursuline College library, Louisville.

[17] Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 174-75.

[18] "Thoreau of course I admire tremendously. He is one of the only reasons why I felt justified in becoming an American citizen. He and Emily Dickinson. . . ." From a ltr. to H.M., Pacific Palisades, Calif., contained in an unpublished volume, Cold War Letters, in the library of Sr. M. Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S., Milwaukee.

[19] See Colman McCarthy, "Renewal Crisis Hits Trappists: Onetime Glamor Order Dwindles," National Catholic Reporter, IX: 8 (December 13, 1967), p. 1. McCarthy estimates that during the late 1940's and early 1950's over 2000 men sampled life at Gethsemani Abbey alone. For further statistics on the decline, see Monachus Indignans, "How Rome 'Squelches' Abbots," National Catholic Reporter, January 11, 1968, p. 11.

[20] Information obtained from Rev. Daniel Walsh in a private interview at Bellarmine-Ursuline College, Louisville, Kentucky, on December 6, 1968.

[21] "I believe that I am obligated however to develop my own vocation in its peculiar and personal character of solitude . . . and believe it so strongly that I feel I could never accept election to the abbatial office."; Thomas Merton, "New Year's Letter 1968," unpublished.

[22] This letter, unpublished, is on file in The Merton Room, Bellarmine-Ursuline College, Louisville.

[23] Alice Payne Hackett, *70 Years of Best Sellers* (New York, 1967), pp. 181-82. *Time* magazine reported in the spring of 1949 that "*The Seven Storey Mountain* is the best selling non-fiction book in the country;" *Time*, Vol. 53 (April 11, 1949), p. 62.

[24] Thomas P. McDonnell, "An Interview with Thomas Merton," *Motive*, October, 1967, pp. 32-33. Actually, Merton fluctuated between disparaging *Seven Storey Mountain* and giving it the recognition which, I think, it deserves. See also the Preface to Thomas P. McDonnell's edited work, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York, 1962), p. vii.

[25] *Monks Pond*, No. 1 (Spring, 1968), p. 57. This magazine, founded and edited by Merton, published, by design, four issues. "The purpose of this magazine," Merton said in the announcement, "is to publish a few issues devoted to poetry and to some unusual prose and then go out of business."; *Ibid*., p. 1.

[26] *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 5-6 (Detroit, 1963), p. 298.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 298.

[28] Letter from Thomas Merton to "Friends," unpublished, dated Septuagesima Sunday, 1967.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] Letter from Thomas Merton to "Friends," unpublished, dated Fall, 1968.

[31] Most of the news stories reported that Merton died by electrocution. In a letter sent to the Abbot of Gethsemani by Six Trappists who were with Merton in Bangkok, however, the exact cause of death was said to be uncertain. Given the circumstances, it will probably remain so. Parts of the letter read: "He [Merton] was found . . . lying on the floor in his pajamas. He was lying on his back with the electric fan lying across his chest. The fan was still switched on and there was a deep burn and some

cuts on his right side and arm. . . . It is difficult to determine at this stage just exactly what was the cause of his death. It is believed that he could have showered and then had a heart attack near the fan, and in falling knocked the fan over against himself; or again that being in his bare feet on a stone floor he may have received a fatal electric shock." (Letter from six Trappist delegates at the Conference to Dom Flavian Burns, unpublished, dated December 11, 1968).

[32] Thomas Merton, "The Trappist Cemetary - Gethsemani," A Man in the Divided Sea (New York, 1946), p. 89.

CHAPTER I

COMMUNIST AND CONVERT

In December 1934, the 19 year old Thomas Merton came to live permanently in the United States. He tells us that he was at that time undergoing his first conversion experience: he was becoming a Communist.[1] Merton's official association with Communism was short-lived and, it seems, not overly enthusiastic, but it was symbolic of his general attitude toward society during his undergraduate years at Columbia. It was there, during the second half of the decade of the 1930's, that he began to lay the foundation for his social thought.

In The Seven Storey Mountain Merton recalled the occasion when he signed up as a member of the Communist Youth League, at which time he took the party name of Frank Swift. The event took place at a plush Park Avenue apartment in the spring of 1935.[2] Merton's Communist activities thereafter were few and rather prosaic. Occasionally he distributed pamphlets at rallies and on street corners. He attended the 1935 Peace Strike. He once gave a talk at a National Student League on Communism in England, a subject, he said, about which he knew absolutely nothing.[3] His most memorable activity was spending an afternoon picketing in front of the Casa Italiana in protest against Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. "I had the feeling that I had done something that was good, if only as a gesture. . . . I had made a kind of public confession of faith. I had said that I was against war--against all war. That I believed wars to be unjust. That I thought they could only ruin and destroy the world."[4]

When Merton dissociated himself from official Communism after a flirtation of about three months there was no dramatic counter-conversion experience. He simply came to see the Communist Youth League as, at best, an irrelevant organization. The ironic incongruity of a party dedicated to the proletariat meeting in a Park Avenue apartment did not pass him by. He was also disenchanted by the rather glib way the party, over the issue of the Spanish Civil War, dropped its adamant anti-war pose and became enthusically warlike. Thereafter, Communist idealism was never the same for him.[5] When the conversation at a party meeting--the first he attended--rapidly degenerated into a verbal dissection of an absent comrade, Merton got up quietly and slipped out. It was the last meeting he attended. "And that was the end of my days as a great revolutionary. I decided that it would be wiser if I just remained a "fellow-traveller."[6]

Though his ties with the party were broken, Merton continued for some time to be guided in his social thinking by an essentially Marxian world view, and for this reason I refer to this first stage in the development of his social thought as his Communist stage. Merton, understandably, had not as a collegian a well thought-out social philosophy. He explained that his "inspiration to do something for the good of mankind had been pretty feeble and abstract from the start. I was still interested in doing good for only one person in the world--myself."[7] Such as it was, however, Merton's social thought at this time incorporated the standard Communist antipathies: toward capitalism, toward bourgeoise culture, and toward the political institutions which were the expression and embodiment of both.

The pervasive characteristic of Merton's social thought during this stage was that it was "worldly"; that is, Merton saw the ills of society as abiding within the political and economic institutions of that society, and their cure dependent upon fundamental reforms within those institutions. It is clear that Merton never seriously advocated political revolution, for the United States, but he did--then and for the remainder of his life--favor a thorough reformation, if not the abolition, of the capitalistic economic system, which would result in a more equitable distribution of wealth.[8] If one can make a distinction between a political Communist and an economic communist, it would be correct to say that Merton was the latter for most of his life. Apropos of this, Merton claimed in a book published in 1949 that, "A man cannot be a perfect Christian--that is, a saint--unless he is also a communist."[9]

There was no doubt a considerable amount of posturing in Merton's social antipathies of this stage, in his anti-bourgeoise attitude for example. As a Communist or a fellow-traveller, one was expected to be against the middle class, even if, as was so with Merton, one lived in the preeminently middle class suburb of Douglaston, Long Island,[10] and even if one indulged in, almost to the point of fanaticism, the soundly middle-class pastime of movie-going.[11]On the other hand, partly through the influence of his artist-father, Merton had a genuine dislike for the materialism which characterized the middle class ethic, especially as expressed in American culture.[12] This "anti-Bourgeoise" attitude was to continue to grow, culminating, after his conversion to Catholicism, in his decision to become a monk.

Another aspect of Merton's official pose as a Communist which had a foundation in his sincerely held convictions was his anti-war attitude. It is difficult to say precisely whence came this attitude, but there is no doubt that the influence of his maternal grandparents, who were pacifists, and with whom he lived while at Columbia, had not a little to do with its formation. But there was also the influence of cultural factors. When Merton took the "Oxford Pledge" in 1935, promising not to take up arms to fight in any war,[13] he was participating in a rather wide-spread mood of pacifism in the country at that time, a mood especially in evidence on college campuses. In that same year, Senator Bennett Champ Clark wrote in Harper's Magazine that "the desire to keep the United States from becoming involved in any war between foreign nations seems particularly unanimous among the rank and file of American citizens."[14]

We also see the influence of cultural factors upon Merton's social thought when we ask ourselves what led Merton to become associated with Communism in the first place. In answering this question it would be wrong to underplay the importance of subjective factors. Merton's decision, obviously, was based in good part upon a conviction, arrived at after serious deliberation, that Communism was the proper solution for the problems facing his world.[15] Merton had first read the Manifesto when he was a student at Oakham School, four years before coming to Columbia,[16] and from the beginning--though always aware it had defects[17]--he was intellectually attracted to Marxist social philosophy. There is also the fact to be considered, however, that Communism, as well as the pacificism with which it was often associated, had a strong vogue in America during the thirties, especially, again, on the college campuses, where it often became either a fad or a symbol. Many students became Communists either because it was simply the thing to do, or more complexly, because it was a critical way in which their generation was attempting to express its identity. Samuel Eliot Morrison, commenting on this phenomenon --a bit too airily perhaps--observed that "Communism, presented as an ideal form of society and a gospel of all-embracing love for mankind, appealed to the muddled young intellectuals, many of whom were persuaded that this, not fascism as Anne Morrow Lindbergh predicted, was 'the wave of the future.'"[18]

Merton's conversion to Roman Catholicism, in the fall of 1938, was like his earlier affiliation with Communism, a symbolic index of general trends in his social thought. In the four years which had passed since his membership in the Communist Youth League, Merton had grown gradually more skeptical of the proposition that social institutions could or should be abolished as a condition for the blissful advent of the classless society. If as a Communist Merton could make sport of the religious concept of heaven,[19] as a prospective convert to a religious commitment he was becoming convinced that classless Marxian society was a "pie in the sky" which required an even greater degree of faith to accept.[20] It would not be accurate to say that Merton abandoned society in this second stage of his early social thought; to say so would be to imply that his commitment to society and social change during his Communist stage had been intense and deeply involved, which was not the case. What happened, rather, was that Merton became theoretically oriented away from society. Through his interests in literature and mysticism his life became directed more toward subjective pursuits. If there was a worldly tone to his social thought during the previous stage, now the tone was unworldly. Merton had not given up on the salvation of mankind but had rather accepted a radically different view as to how that salvation was to come about.

As a Communist, Merton regarded the ills of society as solvable exclusively in human terms; men were in control of their own destinies. As a Christian, he saw history (society-in-motion) as the working out in time, of the Divine plan for mankind. According to this view, it was man who proposed, but God who disposed. Therefore, though man should not take a passive attitude toward his society, neither should he presumptuously assume that his plan for its betterment deserved special attention, let alone, as in the case of Marxism, the stamp of infallibility. As a Communist, Merton emphasized man the collectivity; as a Christian, man the individual. The emphasis was now to be placed upon individual perfection, not because the improvement of society was not crucially important, but because society could not be improved until individuals were improved.

After proposing a connection between Merton's religious conversion and a changed view of society, the question arises, which influenced which? Did Merton's theoretical disengagement from society follow upon his conversion to Catholicism, or did he become a convert because he lost his enthusiasm for the efficacy of social engagement? Actually, it was a bit of both. There were a number of factors which were important in Merton's life as an upper classman and a graduate student which combined to cause simultaneously a withdrawal from society and a movement toward religious conversion. While he was becoming disillusioned with Communism as a cure for society's ills, he was also growing more restless with the directionless hedonism of his personal life. On the positive side, his interest in mysticism was strengthening his conviction [illegible] of a transcendant realm of real[illegible]ity did indeed exist, then [illegible] er the ills of society and m[illegible] them, nor over the moral fl[illegible] ife.

An interestin[illegible] eep dissatisfaction with his pers[illegible] that he often described his decadent moral state in terms of his being a "child of the modern world."[22] Merton's awakened moral consciousness was applied not only to himself but to society as a whole, with the upshot being that society--American society in particular--was judged as morally wanting. Merton arrived at the conclusion that the culture in which he found himself was corrupt, and that his own become a convert because he lost his enthusiasm for the efficacy of social engagement? Actually, it was a bit of both. There were a number of factors which were important in Merton's life as an upper classman and a graduate student which combined to cause simultaneously a withdrawal from society and a movement toward religious conversion. While he was becoming disillusioned with Communism as a cure for society's ills, he was also growing more restless with the directionless hedonism of his personal life. On the positive side, his interest in mysticism was strengthening his conviction in the existence of a transcendant realm of reality.[21] If such a reality did indeed exist, then one need not despair over the ills of society and man's helplessness before them, nor over the moral flabbiness of one's own life.

An interesting facet of Merton's deep dissatisfaction with his personal life was that he often described his decadent moral state in terms of his being a "child of the modern world."[22] Merton's awakened moral consciousness was applied not only to himself but to society as a whole, with the upshot being that society--American society in particular--was judged as morally wanting. Merton arrived at the conclusion that the culture in which he found himself was corrupt, and that his own corruption was due in good part to his immersion in that culture. The logical terminus of this type of thinking was that, if one desired to improve one's personal moral condition then it was imperative to flee the negative influence of an immoral society.

What we witness being developed within Merton at this time is a renewed consciousness of the sacred and the profane vis a vis society.[23] As a Communist, Merton had taken a rather sweeping moral attitude toward society and its institutions. All present institutions stood condemned by the judgment of history and they had to give way before the "wave of the future," leading in the classless society. Now he began to recognize differences among social institutions, and made the moral distinction between those which were profane, that is, "this-worldly," and those which were sacred, that is, "other worldly." Through his conversion he recognized the church as a sacred institution that stood against the profane institutions of modern society.

Merton's conversion was not accompanied by strong missionary inclinations. He did not become a Catholic to go out and change the world but rather to identify himself with an ethic--and, to a minor degree, with a sub-culture--which he felt stood in constant condemnatory witness against a secular culture which, thanks mainly to its infatuation with materialism, had become despiritualized and corrupt, and with which he could no longer identify himself.[24]

There were three steps in Merton's withdrawal from a society which he regarded as "sick."[25] The first was his decision, at the beginning of 1938, to enter graduate school after he had received his B.A. About this he said, "registration in the graduate school represented the first remote step of a retreat from the fight for money and fame, from the active and worldly life of conflict and competition. If anything, I would now be a teacher, and live the rest of my life in the relative peace of a college campus, reading and writing books."[26] The interpretation which Merton attached to his decision to pursue an academic career was no doubt shared by many fellow budding intellectuals, who saw in the "ivory tower" a safe fortress against the onslaughts of a larger culture with which they did not feel at home.[27] The second step in Merton's withdrawal was his conversion--a yet more dramatic and definitive denial of American culture. Writing about his attitude immediately preceding his conversion, he said, "All the internal contradictions of the society in which I lived were at last beginning to converge upon its heart." The final step--Merton's complete repudiation of that society--was his becoming a monk.

Though Merton's conversion was partially an expression of withdrawal from the bulk of American culture, it had affinities to a tradition within that culture which harks back to the 17th century. There have been two major facets to the tradition relating to the phenomenon of religious conversion in American culture. The first, representing the majority of cases, is where the religious conversion is concomitant with an affirmation of the "American way of life." This kind of conversion presupposes at least an implicit adherence to a parallel tradition in American cultural history: the tradition, or myth, which claims that America is the new Eden and Americans the new Chosen People of God, whose task it is to become an example of righteousness for the rest of the world.[28] To become converted, in this sense, means to come to the realization that religion and American culture are essentially at one. It allows interpretations, such as that of Bruce Barton, that Jesus Christ was the epitome of the American businessman. Christ, wrote Barton, "would be a national advertiser today, I am sure, as he was the great advertiser of his own day."[29]

The second facet of the tradition, the one in which Merton participated, is that in which the conversion implies a repudiation of the prevailing ethic of one's society. Society is the "world" with which one must not compromise, and--in some cases at least--one must try to convert. Michael Wigglesworth, one of the earliest examplars of this tradition, which he shared with most of his Puritan contemporaries, noted in his Diary on February 14, 1653: "Now that I am to goe out into the world I am afraid, nay I know I shall lose my heart and my affections."[30] Other major figures in this tradition down through the years have been Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century,[31] Joseph Smith[32] and Charles Finney[33] in the 19th century, and, in the present century, T. S. Eliot, for whom religious conversion encompassed a rejection of American culture dramatized by his moving to England and becoming a British citizen. It is obvious that there are vast differences among these men, respecting both their ideas about religion and what they saw as acceptable and unacceptable in American society; but the common denominator which links them together was their seeing within American society a spirit atagonistic to the spirit of religion; religious conversion, therefore, was seen as a decision, to stand, in one form or another, in opposition to that society.

Merton's decision to become a monk put a seal of seriousness upon his rejection of American culture.

Entering the academic life, or even becoming a convert to a religion as flagrantly "un-American" as Roman Catholicism[34] may have been meaningful indices of his attitude toward society, but these actions did not cost him a great deal and by this time Merton had come to view asceticism as inseparable from authentic religious concern.[35] To become a member of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance--a Trappist--meant to take upon oneself an extremely difficult life. The monks fasted for six months of the year, but their diet otherwise, excluding as it did meat, fish and eggs, provided no attractions for a gourmet. They rose at 2 A.M. each morning and spent about seven hours of the day in the church, attending Mass, singing the "Office" or praying privately. A good portion of the monk's day was spent in manual labor; each monastery, through its farm and its many shops was almost completely self-sufficient.[36] Most significantly, as far as Merton was concerned, the vow of poverty which the monk took meant that he renounced forever the right to own private property.

Certainly, Merton's decision to become a monk is not to be interpreted exclusively in terms of its being a rejection of what he took to be a degenerate American culture,[37] but that this was a prominent motivating factor behind his decision is made clear by the association he saw between ownership of property and the evils perpetrated by that culture.

> The knowledge of what is going on only makes it seem desperately important to be voluntarily poor, to get rid of all possessions this instant. I am scared, sometimes, to own anything, even a name, let alone a coin, or shares in the oil, the munitions, the airplane factories. I am scared to take a proprietary interest in anything, for fear that my love of what I own may be killing somebody somewhere.[38]

That was the negative motivation for surrendering the right, sacrosanct in American culture, to own private property. But poverty, for Merton, was more than a negation. With Thoreau, he could agree that "none can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty."[39]

Merton had intended to give up writing when he entered the monastery. Up to that time he had not had anything of major proportions published, although he had tried hard with a few novels he had written. Once he became a monk, however, he decided that part of the "worldliness" which he must put aside was the desire to write.[40] Merton's abbot eventually convinced him otherwise, but there was a time when the problem caused him considerable anguish, and he did not succumb easily to the suggestion that his decision to give up writing was a bad one. When the Abbot General of the Cistercians visited Gethsemani Merton attempted to have him override his own abbot on the matter, but he said that Merton must continue to write.[41] "So in the end, after a lot of twisting and turning and scruples and questions I am still what I started out to be in the beginning: I am still a writer."[42]

Not only was Merton still a writer, but he was to become a best-seller. Merton's writings of his conversion stage illustrate clearly the unworldly orientation of his social thought. Most of Merton's concern at this time was directed toward the matter of personal perfection, especially as attained through contemplation.[43] But, to the chagrin of some students of the contemplative life[44] Merton was advocating that contemplation was not the exclusive realm of monks but--understood as the process whereby one attained union with God--the fundamental duty of all Christians. But, as contemplation was not possible without asceticism it was imperative that Christians do everything they could to free themselves from the debilitating influence of a culture which had a profound abhorence for asceticism. That Merton gained a wide audience for these opinions is evidenced by the amazing success of his Seeds of Contemplation, a book which is still in print twenty years after publication, and which has enjoyed sales of well over one-half million copies.

Merton's popularity as a writer, due primarily to the fact that he had something to say and said it in a relaxed, colloquial style, is explained also in terms of his coming to age as a writer at a time when the country was experiencing, in Will Herberg's phrase, an "upswing in religion."[45] There was, therefore, in the 1950's, an audience which was receptive to Merton's message of self-renunciation and rejection of the "world." But Merton was not simply a beneficiary within this climate of religious renewal; he was also, as Winthrop Hudson observes, a substantial contributor to it.[46] That this renewal was not a homogeneous phenomenon is emphatically demonstrated by the fact that one of its other prominent spokesmen, on the Protestant side, was Dr. Norman Vincent Peale--than whom one more opposite to the outlook of Thomas Merton it would be hard to imagine. Whereas Peale advocated a religious commitment which implied an affirmation of American culture--thus placing himself in the tradition of writers like Bruce Barton--Merton, representing the antagonistic tradition, held that American culture was corrupted to its "ontological roots," and "not worth the jetsam in the Harlem River."[47] Merton's popularity suggests the possibility that there was in the country during the decade of the 1950's--a decade in which the chief heresy was to question the American way--at least an incipient discontent with many aspects of American culture, a discontent which was to burgeon into the agonizing throes of self-appraisal which the country was to experience in the 1960's.[48]

One of the little known manifestations of the religious revival of the 1950's was the explosive growth of Roman Catholic monasticism, particularly in its Cistercian variety, a phenomenon in which Merton played no little part. When Merton entered Gethsemani Abbey in 1941 there were three Trappist monasteries in the country: Gethsemani in Kentucky, New Mellary in Iowa, and St. Joseph's in Massachusetts. Today there are twelve.[49] In the late 1940's and early 1950's hundreds of young men came to try the monastic way of life. At Gethsemani, which had been built for around seventy monks, there were at one time over two-hundred and seventy men in residence.[50] It was when the three original monasteries began thus to burst at the seams that new foundations were made throughout the country. It is impossible to document the precise influence

Merton had upon this monastic boom, but it is safe to say that a considerable number of young men were brought to Trappist monasteries because of the attractive way he had described monastic life in books like The Seven Storey Mountain and The Waters of Siloe. I would guess that not a single candidate applied for admission to a Trappist monastery during the 1950's who had not read at least The Seven Storey Mountain.[51]

Poetry is the most intense form of literary expression; for this reason, and because Merton's poetry, as all good poetry,[52] is fundamentally didactic, we can get an especially vivid idea of Merton's views on society by looking at some of the poems of this period. First, some generalizations. Merton is classifiable as a religious poet, which means simply that most of his poetry had to do with those themes of transcendental reality with which religion has perennially been concerned. Two subsidiary themes also play important parts in his poetry, nature and--what we are most interested in here--society. I am not suggesting, of course, that these are rigid divisions. A given poem might deal with both nature and society, and all of Merton's poems are religious in one degree or another. The poetry dealing with society which he wrote during this period is uniform in expressing his negative attitude. Merton is much more explicit in his poetry than in his prose in delineating what he regards as the debased nature of American culture, as well as in expressing his pessimism about that culture. It is in his poetry that Merton's apocalyptic vision is dramatically revealed. Merton raises the question whether the degeneracy of contemporary society might not be a sign that the end of history is imminent and the prophecies foretold in the last book of the New Testament are not on the verge of being fulfilled.

One of the central figures in Merton's poetry is the city, the special significance of which is that the city represented for him everything which was wrong with modern culture. Merton's anti-urban attitude is explained in terms of his larger antipathy towards modern technology, of which the modern city is the culmination and chief symbol. In "A Letter to My Friends," which appeared in his second volume, A Man in the Divided Sea, Merton bids farewell to the "woe begone, sad towns,"[53] and assures his friends, back in New York, that he has found at Gethsemani a place of tranquility and peace, visited "By cleaner sun, by rarer birds, by lovelier flowers."[54]

One of Merton's best poems, "Figures for an Apocalypse," contained in the volume of that same name, describes the destruction of New York City at the end of the world. The proximate cause of destruction was an atomic war; the remote cause, the wrath of God. The city, the symbol of modern culture, was destroyed because it deserved to be destroyed; its corruption had reached the point where it could no longer be tolerated by an avenging God. After the terrible visitation the city's epitaph is written in its own ashes.

> This was a city
> That dressed herself in paper money.
> She lived four hundred years
> With nickels running in her veins.
> She loved the waters of the seven purple seas,
> And burned on her own green harbor
> Higher and whiter than ever any tyre.
> She was callous as a taxi;
> Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin,
> And she hailed them, all the days of her life,
> Through the hearts of her six million poor.
> Now she has died in the terrors of a sudden
> contemplation
> --Drowned in the waters of her own, her
> poisoned well.[55]

In "A Responsory, 1948," which appeared in The Tears of the Blind Lions, Merton speaks of two cities which

> . . . sailed together
> For many thousand years.
> And now they drift asunder.[56]

The cities to which he referred are the Augustinian City of God and City of Man. There was a time when

Christianity influenced the social ethic much more profoundly than it does now. Then, the sacred and the secular were not continually at odds with one another. Since, however, the City of Man has become more and more committed to gross materialism, and de-spiritualized thereby, it has doomed itself to destruction in "The tides of new wars."[57] Nowhere is the intensity of Merton's anti-urbanism more sharply expressed than in another poem in this volume, "The Captives--A Psalm"

> Blessed is the army that will one day crush
>   you, city,
> Like a spider.
> Blest are they that hate you. Blest
> That dash your brats against the stones.[58]

The Strange Islands was the last book of poems to be published during the period I am discussing in this chapter. Coming as it did at the time when Merton was reformulating his social thought, it shows that his antipathy toward modern technological culture, symbolized by the city, was to remain a constant. He speaks, in the opening poem of the city being "Centered in its own incurable discontent,"[59] filled with citizens--perfect cases of alienation--who "cannot agree to be at peace."[60] A second poem, "Exploits of a Machine Age,"[61] develops the theme of alienation in the modern city. One half of this volume is taken up with a long dramatic poem, "The

Tower of Babel," a study of the social psychology of totalitarianism, also revolves around a city, in this case Babel, as the central symbol of the evil existing in modern society.

Merton's anti-urbanism, so clearly expressed in his poetry, is an attitude which associates him with a long, and interesting, tradition in American intellectual history. As Morton and Lucia White have pointed out, until recently "enthusiasm for the American city has not been typical or predominant,"[62] and our most celebrated thinkers have often raised their voices in an "anti-urban roar."[63] Those who preceded Merton in this tradition compose an impressive list: Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Henry Adams, Henry James, Howells, Dreiser, Norris, John Dewey, Jane Addams, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Robert Park.[64] By the time Merton was expressing his antipathy toward the city, however, anti-urbanism was no longer in style among American intellectuals.[65] In this, therefore, as in many other things, Merton stood against the mainstream, acting the part of what one of his critics called "a modern man in reverse."[66]

NOTES

[1] Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York, 1948), p. 131.

[2] Ibid., p. 148.

[3] Ibid., p. 147.

[4] Ibid., p. 143.

[5] Ibid., p. 145.

[6] Ibid., p. 148.

[7] Ibid., p. 148.

[8] "There can be no doubt that modern society is in a terrible condition, and that its wars and depressions and its slums and all its other evils are principally the fruits of an unjust social system, a system that must be reformed and purified or else replaced." Ibid., p. 135.

[9] Merton, Seeds of Contemplation (New York, 1949), p. 95.

[10] "The community is one of spacious but not pretentious houses, each with an individual character of its own, girded about with hedge-lined and tree-shaded walks." Will Lissner, "Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet," Catholic World, vol. 166 (February, 1948), p. 427.

[11] "I think John Paul [Merton's brother] and I and our various friends must have seen all the movies that were produced, without exception, from 1934 to 1937." Seven Storey Mountain, p. 149.

[12] Ibid., p. 55, p. 133.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[14] Bennet Champ Clark, "Detour Around War," *Harper's Magazine*, CLXXII (December 1935), p. 1; quoted in *Twentieth Century America*, ed. by J. Joseph Huthmacher (Boston, 1966), p. 307.

[15] *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 134 ff.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[17] "It was an easy and handy religion--too easy in fact." *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[18] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York, 1965), p. 972.

[19] *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 147.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 184 ff; p. 191 ff.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[23] I say "renewed" because, albeit on a less serious scale, Merton had had this consciousness before, particularly as a schoolboy in England. See *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 65 ff.

[24] By emphasizing the interpretation of Merton's conversion as a protest against a culture with which he had become disillusioned, I am not attempting to suggest that this is the only interpretation of the phenomenon, nor even that it is the most important.

[25] Merton, *Secular Journal* (New York, 1959), p. 240.

[26] *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 188.

[27] Morton and Lucia White note that it has been characteristic of the American intellectual, in and out of academe, to feel alienated from his society; see, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Mentor Book ed., New York, 1964), p. 14. This opinion, of course, has been held by many besides the Whites.

[28] One of the best summary statements of this myth was written by Merton himself. See: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, 1966), pp. 23-28. C. Vann Woodward, in two brilliant essays, "The Irony of Southern History" and "A Second Look at the Theme of Irony," comments on some contemporary implications of the myth. See: *The Burden of Southern History*, Revised Edition (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), p. 187 ff.

[29] Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis, 1925), p. 140.

[30] *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657: The Conscience of a Puritan*, ed. by Edmund S. Morgan (Harper Torchbook ed., New York, 1965), p. 4.

[31] A particularly interesting aspect of Edwards' war against a sinful society was his opposition to what he considered the dishonest business practices of the Northampton merchants. In effect, he was opposing incipient manifestations of the ethic summed up in the aphorism, "Nothing succeeds like success." See: Edwards, *Works*, ed. by Sereno E. Dwight (New York, 1830), vol. 6, p. 409.

[32] Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Phoenix Books ed., Chicago, 1964), p. 41 ff.

[33] Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Harper Torchbooks ed., New York, 1965), p. 199, and *passim*.

[34] Merton's initial attraction to Catholicism had much to do with his appreciation of its "medieval" elements.

[35] *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 191 ff.

[36] Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York, 1949), pp. x-xi; also, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York, 1953), pp. 3-11.

[37] Merton became a monk primarily because he was seeking personal perfection and union with God. "The only justification for a life of deliberate solitude," he wrote, "is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men." *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, 1949), p. 26.

[38] Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York, 1959), pp. 110-111.

[39] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Modern Library ed., New York, 1937), p. 13.

[40] "I used to be a writer, but God wants me to die to all that. I shall give up all writing. Nothing more, not even a spiritual journal. Poems I shall renounce forever: did I come to the monastery to be a poet? God forbid." From the original MSS of *Seven Storey Mountain*; see *Renascence*, vol. II, no. 2 (Spring 1950), p. 89.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[43] As explained in books such as *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) and *The Ascent to Truth* (1951).

[44] Aelred Graham, O.S.B., "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," *Atlantic*, vol. 191, no. 1 (January 1953), pp. 70-74.

[45] Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Anchor Books rev. ed., New York, 1960), Chap. IV, p. 46 ff.

[46] Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York, 1965), p. 405.

[47] *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 346.

[48] Another interpretation of Merton's popularity: he brings "vicarious satisfaction to those who remain in normal society yet share his indignation at its evils . . . a pleasing sense of being on the side of the angels." Aelred Graham, "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," Atlantic, vol. 191, no. 1 (January 1953), p. 74.

[49] Besides Gethsemani, New Mellary and St. Joseph's: Holy Ghost in Georgia, Guadalupe in Oregon, Holy Trinity in Utah, Mepkin in South Carolina, Holy Cross in Virginia, Genesee in New York, Assumption in Missouri, New Clairvaux in California, and St. Benedict in Colorado.

[50] Merton, The Sign of Jonas (New York, 1953), p. 5.

[51] Colman McCarthy, a former Trappist and now a political journalist, seems to share this opinion. See: "Renewal Crisis Hits Trappists: Onetime Glamor Order Dwindles," National Catholic Reporter, ix: 8 (December 13, 1967), p. 5.

[52] An opinion of Allen Tate, with which I agree.

[53] Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea (New York, 1946), p. 54.

[54] Ibid., p. 54.

[55] Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse (New York, 1948), p. 23.

[56] Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions (New York, 1949), p. 29.

[57] Ibid., p. 29. For Merton materialism--the idolization of matter--was one of the root causes of war.

[58] Ibid., p. 21.

[59] Merton, The Strange Islands (New York, 1957), p. 18.

[60] Ibid., p. 19.

[61] Ibid., p. 22 ff.

[62] The Intellectual Versus the City (Mentor ed., New York, 1964), p. 13.

[63] Ibid., p. 14.

[64] Ibid., p. 15.

[65] Ibid., p. 13.

[66] Aelred Graham; see note 48 above.

CHAPTER II

THE WORLD AND THOMAS MERTON

In the Preface to the Japanese edition of The Seven Storey Mountain, written about twenty years after the book was originally published in English, Merton described the alteration in his social thinking which had come about since 1948.

> For one thing, when I wrote this book, the fact uppermost in my mind was that I had seceded from the world of my time in all clarity and with total freedom. The break and the secession were, to me, matters of the greatest importance. Hence the somewhat negative tone of so many parts of this book.
>
> Since that time, I have learned, I believe, to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself. In breaking from 'their world' I have strangely not broken from them. In freeing myself from their delusions and preoccupations I have identified myself, none the less, with their struggles and their blind, desperate hope of happiness.
>
> But precisely because I am identified with them, I must refuse all the more definitively to make their delusions my own. I must refuse their ideology of matter, power, quantity, movement, activism and force. I reject this because I see it to be the source and the expression of the spiritual hell which man has made of his world: the hell which has burst into flame in two total wars of incredible horror, the human fury which has resulted in crimes like Auschwitz or Hiroshima. This I can and must reject with all the power of my being.[1]

This passage indicates the significant feature of Merton's social thought which marked the transition from the early period to what, in this chapter, I will refer to as the mature period. The essential change which came about was that Merton turned away from the rather narrow unworldliness which had dominated his thinking during the years immediately following his conversion and engaged in a new kind of worldliness. He began to display a sensitivity and concern for social problems, in the concrete, which recall his undergraduate days at Columbia, but unlike his social outlook then, this new worldliness was based upon a radically different ideological construct--Christian instead of Marxian--besides being, generally, much more carefully thought-out. Merton, as the passage above shows, came to a renewed sense of identity with his fellow human beings; at the same time, however, rather than this obliterating the differences between his ideological allegiances and those of the mass of men, it served to intensify them. Merton, therefore, in his mature period, did not mollify his previous antipathy toward modern civilization, particularly as it was manifested within American culture--if anything that antipathy intensified--but he did begin to draw a sharp distinction between the culture and the men who, he felt, were trapped within that culture.

There are not a few inconsistencies to be found within Merton's mature social thought; one has often to look twice, on many issues, to make sure where he stands, and even then one is not always sure. But it would be wrong to allow oneself, on account of those inconsistencies, to treat lightly the value of that thought. We have Emerson's famous dictum to remind us--but, hopefully, not to intimidate us--that inconsistencies are the preoccupation of little minds.[2] And Paul Tillich once observed, with reference to Sigmund Freud's inconsistencies, that "fortunately, Freud, like most great men, was not consistent."[3] The point to be made here is that the social thought of Thomas Merton, despite its inconsistencies, is remarkable for the sensitivity, incisiveness and prophetic awareness with which it treated of contemporary Western civilization, American culture in particular.

In the final analysis, Merton saw contemporary society in its actuality, that is, as extremely complex, and a great portion of the inconsistencies to be found in his thought are more a reflection of that baffling complexity than an index of the kind and quality of his reasoning, although, as I will presently show, considerations relating to the latter are not without relevance in Merton's case.

There is, it must be made clear, a conditional quality to the type of categorizing of Merton's intellectual history I am doing in this study. When I speak of Merton's early period, with its two stages, and his mature period, I am attempting merely to indicate general areas which are characterized by the prevalence of certain trends in his thought. It must also be recognized that, for all the real changes which came about in the development of Merton's social thought, there was also a strain of consistency, a prevailing sameness of outlook, which must not be forgotten while the differences are being emphasized, such as, for example, his consistent antipathy toward the city. Because of the necessary crudeness of my categories, they have no exact dates for commencement and termination. Merton's Communist stage was roughly synonymous with his undergraduate years at Columbia; his conversion stage is fairly easy to mark at its beginning, coincident as it was with his actual conversion. It is more difficult, however, to discern when the characteristics of Merton's social thought began to alter and give way gradually to the mature period. It does seem certain that for the entire decade of the 1950's Merton was in the process of reformulating--or perhaps I should say, for the first time making conscious efforts to formulate a social philosophy--but it was not until 1960 that the changes that had come about were made fully evident.

What led Merton to change his attitude toward society, to move from a position where he prized being indifferent to that society to one where he regarded such indifference as morally culpable? In general, it was the result of a reevaluation of his role as a monk. Previously, during his conversion stage, Merton had been convinced that the most moral stance he could take vis a vis modern society was simply to live fully as a monk--a life which was a contradiction to everything that society held dear. He came to see, however, that passive protest of that kind was no longer enough; unless one spoke out and acted against the evils of society one may, by silent complicity, share the guilt for these evils.[4]

A phase of recent history which was very important as a specific factor in confirming Merton in this new attitude toward society was what had happened in Germany in the 1930's, especially with respect to the intellectuals and the churchmen. Merton began to think that it was more than careless alarmism to suggest that there were disturbing affinities between the passivism the German intellectuals and churchmen displayed in the face of Hitler and the indifference of so many American intellectuals before what he regarded as tendencies towards political totalism in this country during the last half of the decade of the 1960's.[5] Sometimes during the late 1950's Merton became interested in the literature surrounding Nazi Germany and developed more than a casual acquaintance with it. His familiarity with the lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,[6] Alfred Delp,[7] Franz Jagerstatter[8] and Max Josef Metzger[9] caused a deep admiration for these men who, though virtually their whole society opposed them, had the courage to stand up against the evils of their day.

But another type of man produced by Nazi Germany with whom Merton was deeply impressed, a type he felt was symbolic of the most profound evils existing in modern civilization, was that represented by Adolf Eichmann. Merton was fascinated, and horrified, by the fact that Eichmann, at his famous trial in Israel, was declared by the psychiatrists to be "perfectly sane."[10] The disturbing significance of this declaration for Merton was that it was, given the brand of sanity which was at issue, essentially true. The point was, however, that society has little use for the "sanity" of people like Adolf Eichmann. Sanity, in a world completely bereft of spiritual values, had lost its meaning. It was the "sane" ones, the "well-adjusted ones," who were now dangerous, who could "without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared."[11] What particularly depressed Merton about the situation in Nazi Germany was the passivity, if not out-right complicity, which often characterized the role of the Catholic Church.[12] Merton felt that German monks during the 1930's could not claim their unworldliness as an excuse for their failure to protest against the crimes committed by the Nazis. And here in America, at the present time, "priests and monks have been slow to get involved in the most serious and urgent problems."[13] For his own part, he was not going to turn his back upon the evil which he knew to exist in his society.

Merton maintained that one of the essential tasks of the monk was to fulfill his "prophetic" function. The monk's prophetic function had not so much to do with seeing into the future as seeing into the present. "To prophesy," he said "is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new."[14]

As indicated, Merton's social thought was being reformulated throughout the 1950's. It was not until 1960, and the publication of Disputed Questions that the new orientation of Merton's social thought worked itself into his writings, but there were hints earlier of things to come. No Man is an Island, published in 1955, was noteworthy for the less negative attitude toward the "world" which it displayed. Merton toned down here the themes of separateness and exclusivity which had predominated in earlier books like Seeds of Contemplation and The Ascent to Truth. He was just as much a proponent of the primacy of the contemplative life, but now he put less emphasis on ascesis and more on love, love not only for God but for one's fellow man in society. And, though solitude was still critically important for the contemplative life, the solitude Merton talked about here was primarily an internal solitude; it was possible to live in the turmoil of contemporary society and still be a contemplative. One of his most perceptive critics noticed the subtle changes in Merton's outlook displayed by No Man Is an Island and was prompted thereby to reassess an earlier criticism. Dom Aelred Graham, a Benedictine monk, had called Merton to task in 1953 for failing to distinguish between the "world" and "worldliness." This "intense, one-sided, humorless, propagandistic, morally indignant"[15] writer was guilty, according to Graham, of the philosophical fault of hypostatizing the idea "through failure to notice . . . secularism exists nowhere but in the secular heart of man."[16] Furthermore, Merton by his indiscriminate rejection of modern society, was giving way to the socially concerned Communists.[17] Two years later, in reviewing No Man Is an Island, Graham was much more enthusiastic about Merton. Though still experiencing problems with certain parts of his theology, he was generally pleased with what he saw as a less intractable position toward society. This book, which would find a place "among the enduring works of Christian spirituality," was Merton's best achievement so far and indicated "signs of an all but completely achieved maturity."[18]

It must be emphasized, to avoid over-simplification, that Merton had always displayed a certain openness toward society, even in his most adamantly world-denying books. It was his consistent theme that contemplation was impossible without a genuine love for other men and a concern for the problems with which they are faced. If the desire for solitude is nothing more than a selfish urge to be alone and to be unbothered by the pestering presence of others, then it will prove to be self-defeating. He reminded his readers in Seeds of Contemplation that

> There is only one true flight from the world: it is not an escape from trouble and conflict and difficulty and suffering, but the flight from disunity and separation, to unity and peace in the love of other men.[19]

The core of Merton's new attitude was that this theory became actualized. He came to see that it was not enough simply to live a life which was symbolically opposed to a cultural milieu which he abhorred. He began to recognize and treat the "trouble and conflict and difficulty and suffering" in their concrete manifestations: the ominous tendencies toward political totalism, the threat of nuclear war, the race problem, the Cold War, the detrimental effects of the mass media.

It was in Disputed Questions, published in 1960, where Merton for the first time moved away from speaking generally of the evils of contemporary society and elaborated upon specifics. The main theme of this book, announced in the Preface, was "the relation of the person to the social organization."[20]

The book was a collection of essays on a variety of subjects, one of which, "Christianity and Totalitarianism" had directly to do with contemporary society. It begins with a sentence which is heavy with implications regarding the new direction of Merton's social thought. "The task of the Christian in our time," he wrote, "is the same as it has always been: to build the Kingdom of God in this world."[21] (emphasis mine) This was the "new Merton" speaking, a monk who had been forced to conclude by the circumstances of his society that the role of the spiritual man was actively to combat the evils in the world. "In a world like ours--a world of war, riot, murder, racism, tyranny and established banditry, one has to be able to stand up and say NO."[22]

After Disputed Questions more than half of the twenty-one books Merton wrote were devoted in one degree or another to social topics. He considered his best books to be mainly among these which he had written in the last eight years of his life.[23] In 1962 Merton edited a collection of anti-war essays entitled Breakthrough to Peace, among which was included an essay of his own, "Peace: a Religious Responsibility." Two years later he published Seeds of Destruction, his most outspoken work to that point on the subjects of war and race; and in 1965 he edited Gandhi on Non-Violence, a selection of the writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi which emphasized the importance, indeed the moral necessity, of political involvement. Three books were published in 1966 which further elaborated his social thought: Redeeming the Time, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, and Raids on the Unspeakable. The last book, Merton's favorite,[24] dealt with society and its problems through the indirection of metaphor, a method he employed frequently and one which underlined his basically poetic approach to the world. Mystics and Zen Masters was published in 1967, and Faith and Violence, in which he examined the roots of violence which lay beneath both the modern obsession for war and the race crisis, came out in the summer of 1968.

The underlying thesis of all these books was that modern society was in an advanced state of morel decay. The main cause of this decay was that man had become almost completely de-spiritualized, that is, he had lost his sense--despite all his pietistic prattlings to the contrary--of the Divine, and of the importance of transcendent, eternal realities upon the exigencies of the here and now. This state of affairs, in turn, had been precipitated by modern man's complete, mindless commitment to materialism. There was really nothing being said here which Merton had not already said, or at least implied, before, but the difference now lay in the sense of urgency with which his diagnosis of the ills of society was propounded. Not only was man, and society, in a bad state, but unless something be done soon to remedy the condition, we may be witnessing now the last chapter in the long story of mankind.

The Anatomy of a Metaphor

As I had occasion to mention earlier, Merton was primarily a poetic thinker, as opposed to a philosophic or scientific thinker. By this I mean--particularly with reference to his social thought--that in terms of methodology he relied more on intuition than investigation, and in terms of expression he dealt more in generalities than in particulars. In addressing himself to social issues he often, as observed, employed the use of metaphors.[25] One of his central metaphors, which is important for the light it throws on the main construct of his mature social thought is the three-termed "we," "they," and "the others." Merton explained the metaphor:

> But who are "we"? We are the intellectuals who have taken for granted that we could be "bystanders" and that our quality as detached observers could preserve our innocence and relieve us of responsibility. . . .[26]
>
> When I speak of "them," you will understand that I mean those special

> ones who seek power over "all the others," and who use us as instruments to gain power over the others.[27]

The scenario for modern society, therefore, was envisioned by Merton as follows: This society is divided into three groups. By far the largest of these is the vast majority of mankind, not without faults, but by and large innocent in their simple desire to live their lives in peace. The second group, solidified in cynicism, is the relatively small coterie of politicians, militarists, and industrialists who wish to manipulate the vast majority of mankind for their own selfish ends. The third group, also small, the one to which Merton associated himself, is the world's intellectuals. It is the duty of these intellectuals to stand up against the politicians, militarists and industrialists in order to protect the vast majority of mankind from, not only exploitation, but possibly even destruction. "We," Merton explained, "the intellectuals, stand in the middle, and we must not forget that, in the end, everything depends on us."[28]

One is reminded, in considering Merton's "we," of comparable elite cadres of intellectuals in the writings of Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot. Merton's intellectuals, however, were to be far more than cultural pace-setters. Their function was moral rather than aesthetic; the world was facing a crisis the likes of which it had never before witnessed--the very existence of mankind was threatened--and it was up to the intellectuals, literally, to save the world. Their obligations in this task were especially pressing for they had to redeem themselves for past offences. Too often in the past, Merton pointed out,[29] intellectuals had "sold out" by allowing themselves to be used as pawns by "them." They had thus, in Julien Benda's phrase, committed treason against the people.[30]

What precisely were the intellectuals to do to save mankind? In general, Merton urged that they enter into whatever kind of protest activity they could to dramatize their position. The intellectual as a man of special talents which could command a large audience must use those talents to combat the "prevailing trends toward global war, totalism, racism, spiritual inertia, and crass materialism."[31] Merton, for his own part, felt that he had in his monastic vocation, "the vocation of Job,"[32] a built-in protest against the culture which perpetrated these trends. But this, which was at one time sufficient, was no longer so. Thus, since 1960, we witness more and more of Merton's writings--his most powerful weapon as an intellectual--being devoted to discussions of critical social issues. This was going to be the form of his standing up and saying NO.

There was another side of Merton, however--Merton the contemplative monk--which, even in the call to action, warned against an "over-action" which would defeat the very purpose for which the intellectuals were striving. Merton distinguished between action and activism; action was good, indeed, necessary; activism was bad, for it depleted the spirit and separated a man from his true self. One must not be so obsessed with "doing something," even for a cause as important as that of the intellectuals, that one runs off in all directions at once and loses the equanimity which is so vital in so critical a time. To do so, thus rendering oneself ineffective, would be to play right into "their" hands, who are all dedicated activists.[33] This precautionary admonition also points up Merton's pervasive conviction, as a Christian, that, necessary though it be, no amount of human effort is sufficient to ameliorate a situation the outcome of which ultimately depends upon God.

"They," in Merton's tripartite metaphor, were exemplified unambiguously by such figures as Hitler, Stalin and, in a slightly different capacity, Adolf

Eichmann--whose quality of evil was unquestionable. But Merton had a suspicion of politicians in general, including those who were, ostensibly at least, on the opposite end of the spectrum from the ruthless representatives of totalitarian movements in recent times; thus, Merton often considered simply "politicians" as part of "them." In September, 1941, while appalled by the actions of Hitler, Merton was not, on the other hand, favorably impressed by the political leaders on the allied side. Roosevelt was being hypocritical,[34] and he and Churchill demonstrated that "they have only the vaguest and most muddled notion of what exists for them to do."[35] Merton's estimate of Truman is pretty well indicated by his biting satire, Original Child Bomb.[36] Eisenhower, though "a very fine person . . . as a president he was zero."[37] He also had a personal liking for Kennedy, who was "better than most. But I cannot say he has me fully convinced."[38] As for the thirty-sixth president of the United States, Merton commented wryly: "If Lyndon Baines Johnson suddenly went into nirvana and abandoned politics it would not be a disaster."[39]

Toward the end of his life Merton tempered his suspicion of politicians--*qua* politicians--when he came to recognize the moral necessity of political involvement, even for monks, but he never succeeded in completely ridding himself of this suspicion. In this he was "typically American," especially so because, as was the case with his anti-urbanism, he seemed to retain the suspicion of politicians long after the tradition had lost much of its popularity. One can often detect in Merton's use of the word "politician" a definite intent to designate thereby a person of decidedly lesser nobility than the remainder of the human race. In some respects, Merton was a successor of a man like Mark Twain, who could speak of congressmen as "bandits" and legislatures as "asylums," but whose irreverence for the American political system was fed in great part by an idealist's disappointment over the discrepancy between the situation as it was and as it should have been.

Also included among "them" were men like Roswell Gilpatric,[40] Edward Teller[41] and Herman Kahn,[42] the "nuclear realists," who could without flinching coldly assess, in terms of mega-deaths, the losses to be sustained in an all-out war. These people, who frightened Merton more than some of the most outrageous politicians, were men of high intelligence. Their tragedy seemed to be that they were nothing more than that; it was as if they had been bled of human feelings--all in the name of "hard-headed," "clear-sighted," "objective" thinking. By and large these men were sincere; many of them were moralistically inclined, and convinced of the ethical impeccability of their position. For Merton, it was precisely their moralistic self-righteousness which made them so dangerous.[43]

"They" also included the powers behind the mass media. The mass media, for Merton, represented one of the more sinister forces operating within American culture. Like that toward politicians, his attitude toward the mass media was one of his few, but persistent, prejudices. By way of a sweeping, indiscriminating judgment, Merton envisioned the mass media as acting--albeit unconsciously perhaps--in conspiratorial conjunction with the politicians, militarists and financiers who were attempting to exploit the masses. They did this by serving as organs of propaganda for "them," but in a highly devious way: they promulgated information to the public in such a manner that while disseminating the "party line," they put the people under the illusion that they were thinking things out for themselves. Thus the public was put in a peculiarly defenseless position, Merton reasoned, for there are no people less free than those whose freedom is mainly illusory, as is the case with most Americans.[44] Merton's analysis of the mass media was one instance when his intuition did not serve him well. Although one might find cases where the arrangement which he describes seems to hold true, the history of American journalism demonstrates that the press in this country, by and large, has been anything but a consistent spokesman for the powers-that-be. The opposition to the Vietnam war, in which the press became thickly involved, and often played a leading role, is the most recent evidence of this fact.

On the other hand, when Merton speaks of one of the negative effects of the mass media being their ability to confirm modern, urbanized man in his sense of isolation from the other members of his society, he seems to be on firmer ground.[45] There are, at least, many American sociologists who agree with him. Ernest Van Haag, to cite one, arrived at a conclusion remarkably similar to Merton's. "Excessive communication," he said

> serves to isolate people from one another, from themselves, and from experience. It extends bonds by weakening them. People become indifferently tolerant; their own life as well as everything else is trivialized, eclectic, and styleless.[46]

Finally, "they" included authoritarians of every kind, not excluding the ecclesiastical, who were dead to humanitarian sentiments and whose monomaniac obsession with power led them to desire but one thing: to lord it over the rest of men. Though Merton's "they" were most often personified in Western figures, American figures in particular, he made quite clear that "they" were essentially the same, in whatever ideological weeds they might be found. "They" were to be found on both sides, East and West,[47] and often had more in common with one another than with their own people. But this was also true of "us," the intellectuals; it was incumbent upon the intellectuals, therefore, throughout the world, to recognize their common bond and unite against "them." Merton's own varied association with intellectuals of many countries--his friendship with Pasternak is a good example--[48] demonstrate the degree to which he believed in this bond and sought to strengthen it in whatever way possible. "I am more concerned," he wrote, "with dialogue with selected groups of people--intellectuals, etc., and not with large numbers or with a movement. This may sound like an aristocratic approach, but I think it is a traditional monastic one."[49]

"The Others"--the vast majority of mankind--were for Merton somewhat a problem. One of the golden threads that runs throughout the fabric of

Merton's life is his love for humanity. This love was not always of the same intensity, nor did it always manifest itself in the same way. As a Communist, Merton's concern for mankind, though genuine, was rather impersonal and highly theoretical. When Merton was converted, a strong element of personalism was injected into his attitude toward mankind, but still theory prevailed over practice. It was not until his mature period, by which time he had absorbed a considerable amount of existentialist thinking, that Merton's love took on a life and an immediacy which--if it has known before--it had not displayed. When Merton awoke to the consciousness that all men were his brothers, not merely in theory but in fact, in their flesh and blood, in their sublimity and in their sinfulness, it was as if he had undergone another conversion. He told of an incident which happened in the early 1960's during a trip to Louisville when, passing in a car through the downtown district, he felt a sudden, almost overpowering sense of identity with the people on the streets. "Thank God, thank God, that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others. To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is so much of our monastic thinking."[50]

Precisely because Merton felt this immediate sense of identity with the members at large of his society, he was made all the more acutely aware, as the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter points out, of the ideological chasm which continued to separate him from "the others." "I must refuse all the more definitely," he said, "to make their delusions my own."[51] The "delusions" to which he referred were related to the composite of characteristics adhering to a people living in an affluent, highly industrialized, urban-centered culture. Merton was well-grounded in the current sociological theorizing which attempts to explain the complex plight of modern man in Western society and he conceded that many of the problems with which "the others" in that society were faced--loss of community, alienation, loneliness--were problems not of their own choosing but forced upon them by factors which were, in some respects at least, beyond human control. This is not what he meant by their "delusions." Modern man became deluded, for Merton, primarily by his willing acceptance of the ethic which underlay the culture in which he lived--and this applied especially to Americans--the ethic of materialism. He might have been willing to admit a modicum of determinism when speaking of society as a whole, but when the matter was considered in terms of the individual--in which terms, for one of Merton's temperament, it must ultimately be considered--then he was speaking of a freedom of choice which had ineluctable moral consequences. In so far, therefore, as "the others" had freely chosen to identify themselves with the ethic of materialism, Merton refused to join hands with them.

The basis for the "delusions" of modern Western man, then, was his acceptance of materialism as the right philosophy of life. Materialism, for Merton, meant giving material things more than their due, that is to say, allowing them a quality of existence which precluded the source of their existence, God.[52] To accept things thus, without recognizing their dependence upon God, was to fail to go "through" them to the Divine reality, and, in effect, to idolize them. The idolization of matter--making it a god by failing to recognize its dependence upon God--was a form of idolatry which Merton felt lay at the bottom of other, more serious, idolatrous preoccupations engaged in by "the others." From the acceptance of things as disjointed from their true existence, men proceeded to accept themselves, or aspects of themselves, in terms which had no foundation in reality. They were guided by myths[53] and simulacra which they were convinced were true because the myth upon which all other myths was founded, the most pernicious of all, was the conviction that they were "objective" thinkers.[54]

This kind of delusion, on the personal level, was unfortunate, but when it effected a whole society it became dangerous. On that level, a "false mysticism" pervaded the atmosphere and the people became convinced that the myths about their collective selves --the "volk," the "party," the "free world"--were perfectly true, and that, further, they had a duty to live according to those myths, even though it might mean running rough shod over people who did not accept the myths.[55]

Merton spoke often and articulately about many, of what he considered to be, the most pressing problems facing modern society. There were the matters of war (particularly nuclear war) and race, which he considered of predominant importance, and which will be discussed fully in the following chapter. He was also concerned about such things as poverty, conservation and the draft. In some respects Merton was very much a realist in dealing with these problems, that is, he proposed concrete solutions for what were seen as concrete problems. Regarding the draft, for example, he submitted that "it is necessary to abolish the draft not only to liberate our young men from the . . . moral quandry in which it puts them, but also to remove the temptation to carry on wars like the one now going on in Vietnam."[56] But Merton was primarily a religious thinker and as such he saw all the problems of society as reducible, ultimately, to the problem of the individual who had lost his sense of connectedness with the transcendent. The ultimate solutions to society's problems, therefore, were to be found within the context of religion. Social problems were but a collective representation of individual problems, and the particular crisis with which the individual was faced today could only be met by a personal metonia, a complete conversion of one's life and manners.

For all his insistence upon the necessity for institutional reformation, Merton maintained that any such reformation, unless preceded or accompanied by personal conversion, would prove futile. The emphasis upon the individual as the key to stable social change is related to several influences upon Merton's thinking. Most important, of course, was the fact of his deep commitment to Christianity, with its emphasis upon individual salvation. Also important was Merton's being a poet, with the highly subjective, individualizing implications that role has carried with it for the past century and a half. Finally, there was Merton's interest in and adherence to various aspects of existentialist philosophy--he called himself a "Christian existentialist--a philosophy which is focused upon the individual person.

For one who answered a question about his political affiliation with, "no party, generally liberal,"[57] this insistence upon individual conversion would seem to be a display of a dangerous bit of conservatism. Are not the crises which face American society, particularly that of race, for example, of such urgency that they demand immediate action, the type of action which cannot wait upon the "conversions" of recalcitrant individuals? Merton would agree wholeheartedly with this proposition. He insisted upon the need for profound institutional reform. Laws would have to be changed; new legislation bearing immediately upon the problems at hand would have to be passed. All this was necessary beyond question, but it was not enough. These things would do good, but it would be, for many in the population at least, an imposed good, which meant that, for them, it would be "evil." For Merton, moral good could no more be imposed upon a person from without than could moral evil; like evil, it had to be freely accepted before it could take root, before the person himself became either good or evil.

"The race question," Merton argued, "cannot be settled without a profound change of heart, a real shake-up and deep reaching metanoia on the part of white America."[58] By arguing thus Merton associated himself with an important school within contemporary psychology--another individual-oriented discipline. Karl Jung had contended "that if the individual is not truly regenerated in spirit, society cannot be either, for society is the sum total of individuals in need of redemption."[59]

As a young monk, Merton would have been strongly inclined to argue that, in its religious manifestation, the conversion which was the necessary prelude to any long-lasting social reform would best take the form of an acceptance of the Christian faith, preferably according to the Catholic interpretation. His own conversion had been both cause and symbol of a radical alteration in his life. As Merton grew older, however, though not mitigating his commitment to Christian belief, he came to make a distinction between the cultural church and the "true" church, and, concomitantly, between true conversion and false conversion. The distinction between the cultural church and the true church was the distinction between Christendom--the political, cultural and institutional construct which had built up around Christian beliefs during the course of history, often smothering that belief in the process--and Christianity--the gathering of the baptized, those who sincerely believed in the teachings of Christ and whose belief was manifested in their lives. It was important to be converted to Christianity; it was considerably less important, perhaps even dangerous, to be converted to Christendom. Christendom had down through history been guilty of many decidedly un-Christian acts, and even now institutional Christianity displayed characteristics because of which, he wrote a recent convert to Catholicism, "one only comes in [i.e., to the Catholic Church] with blinders on."[60]

But the conversion upon which Merton insisted, though ultimately related to basic Christian principles, need not necessarily take the form of a conscious acceptance of those principles in all their explicitness. As he becomes more deeply immersed in the study of Oriental religions, and as his knowledge of contemporary existentialism grew, Merton began to recognize "implicit Christian" characteristics in not only non-Christians, but even in people who claimed to be agnostics or atheists.

With respect to the latter, Merton discovered that what these people were most often objecting to in Christianity was not the essential teachings of Christ but the negative cultural accoutrements which had surrounded those teachings--in other words, the very Christendom to which Merton himself was reluctant to pledge his allegiance.[61] Indeed, Merton developed for many agnostic or atheist existentialistic thinkers a profound respect, based on the fact that he detected in them a greater degree of genuineness and honesty, a more sincere concern for humanity, than was to be found among most professional religionists. Part of Merton, that part specifically identified as "the intellectual," was more and more inclined to associate itself with the free-wheeling "implicit Christianity" of the existentialist thinkers. "My position," he explained to a Chilean friend

> is non-dogmatic, existentialist Christian in a completely non-conformist evangelical sense, and in many ways my views approximate closely the humanism of someone like Albert Camus.[62]

The New Theology and Aftermath

Two major religious phenomena of the 1960's which had much to do with the relationship between religion and society, and in which Merton was vitally interested, were the emergence of the New Theology, as manifested especially in the Death of God movement, and the renewal taking place within the Catholic Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council. The good and the bad elements which Merton detected in these two phenomena serve to indicate some of his underlying suppositions about society and American culture in particular.

Generally speaking, Merton was not overly impressed by the Death of God movement. His review of Honest to God, the volume which in great part inaugurated the movement, was unenthusiastic. He was dismayed with the Bishop of Woolwich's lack of theological and historical perspective, and he also detected in the book a tone of insecurity and special pleading. Was this not merely "another, more sophisticated, better documented, manual of Christian salesmanship?"[63] And, was it not perhaps "simply a desperate attempt to escape a religious shipwreck and find security in fellowship, any fellowship?"[64] On the American scene, the participants in the movement, with the notable exception of J. J. Altizer,[65] showed themselves to be rather long on sensationalism--a preeminently American trait--and, again, short on theological and historical acumen. Most difficult to accept for Merton, and the most telling index of the limitations of these thinkers, was their naively touting the idea of the "absence of God," the approach to

Divinity by negation, as something new when it was in fact "perfectly traditional."[66] The proponents of the Death of God movement displayed an embarrassing obliviousness to the whole "apophatic" tradition within Christian theology, a tradition which "goes back beyond Pseudo-Dyonisius and the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century."[67] St. Gregory of Nyssa was the founder of the apophatic school, and Evagrius Ponticus and St. Maximus were among its more illustrious members. Its most famous proponent of later centuries was St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish Carmelite.[68] The essential teaching of this school is that

> if we say "God is," indicating that in him is the fullness of all we can conceive of as Being, we must complete it by saying "God is not" to indicate that the fullness of his Being is far beyond anything that we can conceive of as existing.[69]

Apart from its scholarly thinness, however, Merton thought that the Death of God movement had played an extremely important role in delineating what should be the right relationship between religion and society. It was a "necessary iconoclastic protest against every form of popular religion which has blasphemed God by trying to sell him on the same terms as last year's Chevrolet."[70] What Merton referred to here was the prevailing propensity throughout the course of

Christianity to make of God an object which could be manipulated for human purposes. Out of this propensity arose the "God is on our side" syndrome, which has been behind some of the most atrocious examples, produced by Christians, of "man's inhumanity to man." American culture, given the importance of religious influences upon its formation, was, for Merton, especially guilty of perpetrating this attitude of self-righteousness based on the conviction of divine approbation for one's actions. It was this which explained the inability of many Americans to make objective judgments in the realm of foreign policy. If one is on the side of good, this mentality has it, then nothing which one does is evil; whatever might be the unpleasantries of any given action, everything lends itself, ultimately, to a favorable moral interpretation. The result of this kind of thinking is a peculiarly absurd brand of nihilism. It can lead, for example, a Secretary of the Navy to say without blushing that Americans, as the last great hope for peace in the world, should be willing, for that reason, to initiate wars of aggression. Though this policy might

> cast us in a character new to a true democracy--an initiator of a war of aggression--it would earn for us a proud and popular title, we would become the first aggressors for peace.[71]

Merton saw in the Death of God movement, therefore a healthy counter to what he considered to be one of the most insiduous perversions of religious thinking in modern culture. That was the definitely positive side of the movement. This side was sadly imbalanced, however, by a tendency, produced by an obsessional concern for "relevance," to clothe itself precisely with those aspects of modern culture to which no sincerely religious person should want to be relevant. In its less serious manifestation this courting of modern culture took the form of aping some of the worst antics of Madison Avenue advertising. It seemed to Merton that there was a depressing amount of gimmickry in the Death of God movement which was calculated, by means of "reverse psychology," to win modern man over to the benefits of religious commitment. In an article to Harper's Magazine, he warned unbelievers against this approach.

> Currently they are playing a game called "God is Dead." But do not take this too seriously. This is only another card in the ideological card game, and what they want, in the end, is the same as before: to get you into their Churches. I confess I myself fail to see how the claim "God is dead" constitutes an argument for going to church.[72]

Much more seriously, Merton indicted the Death of God movement for the dangerous implications of its almost blanket acceptance of "the world." With its obsession for "relevance" the movement had been irresponsibly glib in saying that religion must identify itself fully with modern society, that it must eschew the tradition of other-worldliness and become a dynamic force within this world. Up to a point, this argument was commendable; it was the absence of necessary qualifications, however, which disturbed him. With which world, Merton wanted to know, do the Death of God people want to be one? With which society do they wish to identify? Is it with a society which advocates wars and racism, which can produce an Auschwitz or a Dachau, which can allow some people to starve and grow sick while others worry about calories and enjoy complete accessibility to the benefits of modern medicine? In other words, terms like "modern society" are ambiguous, and one must clarify what is meant by them. Because the Death of God movement did not make itself clear on this score, and, worse, because of its enthusiasm for the wrong kinds of things in modern culture, it implied a "passive submission to power politics"[73] and, in the end, "simply issues in acquiescence to political totalism, the police state."[74]

Merton was very much encouraged by Vatican II, and its implications for the Church in modern society. He felt that the counciliar fathers had, especially in the document, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," struck the right balance between what, for the man of religion, is acceptable and unacceptable in the modern world, between what is to be cultivated and what is to be rejected. He was pleased by the changes which were subsequently brought about within the structure of the Church, which reflected the new mentality of openness to secular society displayed by Catholicism. There is no doubt that Merton's own changed attitude toward society which flowered during his mature period was reaffirmed, and in some respects initiated by Vatican II.

Not everything which followed upon the Council pleased Merton, however. Like most liberals,[75] he thought that many of the changes were either too few, too slow, or both. With respect to monasticism, for example, with which he was most immediately concerned, he felt that drastic changes had to take place soon if it were to survive as a meaningful institution.[76] But Merton was not an advocate of change for change's sake, and where he leveled criticism against certain changes it was because he thought that, like the Death of God movement, they were motivated by a wrong-headed concern for "relevance," a mindless impulsion to relate to the wrong things. Thus he could score certain manifestations of liturgical reform--which by and large he fully supported--as further examples of attempts to "sell" religion as if it were a commodity rather than a commitment.[77] The Catholic Church could do without a great deal of "guitar playing and liturgical gamesmanship," for the fact of the matter was that people did not want to be bothered "by the sheer triviality of so much religious vaudeville."[78] The most vital function of the Church, in terms of mankind at large, was to face up to the truly critical problems facing the world, to work toward the "recovery of a creative and prophetic iconoclasm over against the idols of power, mystification and super-control."[79]

Merton had a more than usual sensitivity to the reality of such idols, and of their potential for finally becoming the only gods which men worshipped. For this reason, one of the poignant characteristics of Merton's social thought, especially toward the end of his life, was its pessimism. Merton did not despair[80]--in fact, he considered despair the end result of a selfish egoism, a luxury which he could not afford[81]--but he did from time to time reach the point where he thought the problems of contemporary society were beyond human remedy. Speaking specifically of the race question, he wrote to James Baldwin that he was convinced "that there is almost nothing to be done that will have any deep effect or make any real difference."[82] In another letter to Dorothy Day, he referred to the international situation as extremely precarious, and although he said he had no specific reason to believe something catastrophic was going to happen, yet "I think I can reasonably say that there is just no reason for it not to happen. I think the evil in us all has reached the point of over flowing."[83] Sounding a still sadder note, Merton wrote to another friend: "the night is falling upon us and we find ourselves without the serenity and fulfillment that were the lot of our fathers."[84]

The Essayist

Though Merton's mature social thought is characterized chiefly by a turning toward the problems of modern society in all their immediacy, coupled with an intense conviction of his obligation to involve himself in those problems, he did not reap from the experience the comforting assurance that he, or any one else, could do much about them. But even when one says this much about Merton one does so with reservations, fully aware that in some passage, in some book, Merton is going to undercut one's dogmatism about him. Merton, as I have stated previously, was not an achitechtonic thinker. He contradicted himself, and, like Emerson, he knew he contradicted himself. Though this is a tribute to his self-knowledge and his honesty, it does not make any easier the task of formulating his thought, specifically, his social thought. I suggested earlier that much of the confusion in Merton's social thought can be attributed to the confusions of the extremely complex society he was attempting to define and relate to. I also suggested that this confusion is explained in terms of the type of thinker he was, a poetic thinker rather than a philosophic one, a man who proceeded more by intuition than analysis.

In speaking of Mark Twain, Bernard De Voto said that he is "usually to be found on both sides of any question he argues. His intelligence was intuitive, not analytical."[85] This critique applies equally well to Merton. Merton's thinking and writing were inextricably bound up with the totality of his life; there was no divorce between the man thinking and the man living. Merton wrote, therefore--and he was almost always writing--out of the existential pressures which were bearing upon him at the moment. This meant that he could write about a given subject from one perspective at one time and from quite a different perspective at another time. Merton never contradicted himself in any glaring way; it was more a matter of the alteration of accidentals rather than the exchanging of essentials, but this was enough to leave problems for unwary readers.

The types of inconsistencies found in Merton's thought are those which one would expect from a writer "on both sides of any questions he argues."[86] With respect to his social thought, one must be prepared to find Merton, at any given time, either arguing against or severely modifying a position which he took earlier. If he could argue for the necessity of intellectuals banding together in opposition to "them,"[87] he could also score the facile thinking which attempts to divide up the world neatly into "good guys," and "bad guys."[88] If he could chide the Death of God theologians for flabby thinking and poor theology,[89] he could also maintain that sincere spontaneity was preferable to hard-nosed intellection and only with qualifications admit that he was a theologian.[90] If he could urge people to stir themselves out of their moral passivity and involve themselves against social issues,[91] he could also wonder if perhaps all such activity was futile.[92] If Merton could sweepingly censure the mass media,[93] it was while over-looking the fact that he, as the author of over forty books, some of which were best-sellers, was very much a part of the mass media in America. The list could be extended, but I think the point is clear that Merton's thought on any given issue often did not square with what was said before or with what was left unsaid.

Merton once observed of Simone Weil that none of her books were written as books. "They are all collections of notes, essays, articles, journals and letters."[94] With the exception of *The Ascent to Truth*, plus his autobiography, a history and two biographies, this is a perfect description of Merton's own prose writings.[95] *The Ascent to Truth* demonstrates that though Merton did not consistently display himself as an architectonic thinker, he was capable of becoming one. For the most part, Merton was essentially an essayist, a fact which reflected not only the literary form which he preferred but the type of thinker and person he was. An essayist, as a thinker, is a "tryer" (Fr. "essayer") rather than a "finisher;" he is a man who likes to grapple with ideas without necessarily pinning them to the mat and being declared the victor over them. One of the current manifestations of the essayist, as thinker, is the scholar who at the end of his article sent to the professional journal lists a series of questions his effort had raised but failed to answer. An essayist, as a person, is one who has wide and eclectic interests; he writes essays because he is concerned with many things and he wants to deal with as many of them as possible in writing. An essayist, as a person, is interesting to read, for nothing combats boredom more effectively than diversity. As a thinker, however--a "tryer" rather than a "finisher"--an essayist is difficult to follow, mainly because, in most cases, he is not following himself. He writes about things as he sees them at the moment, and not in terms of what he may have said about them in a previous essay. This, in essence, is the main difficulty in coming to grips with a writer like Thomas Merton.

Cultural Perspectives

When Merton, in the decade of the 1960's, came to the conclusion that as an intellectual and a religious leader he must concern himself more directly than he had hitherto done with the problems of the society in which he lived, he was not acting in isolation. There was in America during that decade noticeable movements, both among the nation's intellectual community and among the churches, toward greater social concern. The intellectuals, especially the academic intellectuals, had been for the previous two decades relatively content inhabitants of the ivory tower. This tendency of intellectuals to isolate themselves was altered by the Kennedy administration, which called many intellectuals to Washington to serve in the government, and, thereby, it seems, gave to the community at large a renewed sense of confidence in its ability to influence American public opinion. Of course, the growing degree of active participation in politics, as well as the deepening sense of responsibility toward social problems, was not, as books like The Dissenting Academy point out,[96] shared by all intellectuals. There remained many academicians who did not consider social involvement to be in accord with the nature of their profession. The fact remained, however, that a pattern was changed, and more and more intellectuals began to look at their relationship to their society in a new way; the campuses, as manifested by the "teach-in" movement, became centers for social thought and activity to a degree which they had not been for a long time, in good part because of the influence of this new breed of socially concerned intellectuals.

At the same time, American churchmen were also awakening to a new sense of social commitment. The New Theology was but the theoretical expression of a wide-spread movement among the churches to "up-date" themselves and to become "more in tune with the times." This movement most often translated itself, on the practical level, as a greater and more intense degree of social involvement. Social involvement was not new for the American churches, any more than it was for the intellectuals; as Harvey Cox pointed out, the churches, by their renewed social concern, were reclaiming a tradition and moving back into "the main stream of theology in America."[97] It was not unusual, during the 1960's, to see ministers, priests and nuns participating in civil rights marches, protesting against the war in Vietnam, or espousing various causes on behalf of labor. Churchmen in general, as was Thomas Merton in particular, were moving away from an attitude of unworldliness to one of worldliness.

I would like to conclude this chapter, as I did the first, with some remarks on Merton's poetry. The most noticeable thing about the poetry of Merton's mature period, compared to that of his early period, is that there was less of it. Including a collection which was first printed in 1959,[98] six volumes of poetry had appeared before 1960; after that date only three volumes were published, Original Child Bomb, Emblems of a Season of Fury, and Cables to the

Ace. There were two main reasons for this curtailment in Merton's poetic output. In the first place, Merton was so burdened with various other writing commitments that it was difficult for him to find the time and leisure necessary for the writing of poetry.[99] Secondly, conconmitant with the reformulation of his social thought, Merton was at this time in the process of substantially revising his whole philosophy of poetry.

During the 1960's Merton had come to the conclusion that the majority of contemporary American poets had surrendered their integrity, as poets, by their prevailing indifference toward the critical social problems which beset the country. With the exception of Robert Lowell, he felt that "the academic poets of the U.S. are simply caught in the most sterile impasse where they do nothing except play esoteric language tricks."[100] This was in contrast to the Latin American poets, who were "alive," who seemed "to have something honest to say, to be sincerely concerned with life and humanity."[101]

In order to counteract the damage done by these poets who had "sold out to the Establishment," or who were catering to the philistine tastes of mass man, Merton, though aware of the inherent dangers in taking such a tack,[102] decided that it was his personal obligation as a poet to begin writing a poetry of protest which would, through its form as well as through its content, express his discontent and nonaffiliation with modern American culture. He would write anti-poetry.[103] Beyond its purely negative value as protest literature, this anti-poetry would also, hopefully, bring around to its true course the errant mainstream of American poetry. The logic of Merton's theory might be stated thus: Because the "Establishment" poets, writing conventional poetry, had compromised the integrity of their art, their conventionality had in a sense become symbolic of their compromise. The thing to be done, therefore, was to turn poetry on its head, and by producing the opposite of conventional poetry, that conventional poetry would be purged of its sins and the way would be cleared for the emergence once again of a poetry of truth and integrity.

Merton's estimate of the degree of social responsibility exercised by the generality of poets reveals his somewhat superficial knowledge of what has been happening recently in American poetry.[104] "Academic" poets such as Galway Kinnell, Louis Simpson, James Wright, and Donald Hall--to name a few--are far from passively acquiescing to what they consider the predominant evils of their age.[105] Apart from this, however, Merton's advocacy of anti-poetry is illustrative of his new attitude toward poetry as a whole. As an undergraduate at Columbia he could laud Mark Van Doren for teaching a poem "as it was in itself," that is, irrespective of any connection it might have had to such things as the biography of the poet, or the sociological milieu out of which it emerged.[106] In other words, Merton, at that time, favored the essentially romantic notion that the poet and poetry were existents aseptically set apart from the mundane exigencies of society. The Merton who wrote anti-poetry was of a different frame of mind. Though not without its ambivalences, his later attitude was informed chiefly by the conviction that the poet was a sort of artistic functionary: the poet put his art to work in order to change the world.

I mentioned a collection of Merton's poems which had been published in 1959. Although this volume contained only work of his early period, it carried an essay, "Poetry and Contemplation," which provides additional help in understanding Merton's new ideas toward poetry, and, by indirection, toward society. This essay was a revision of another with the same title which had appeared ten years before in Figures for an Apocalypse. In the first essay Merton had discussed the difference between active and passive, or mystical, contemplation. Active contemplation is where man takes the initiative in disposing himself for union with God. Passive contemplation is where that union is actually effected by God.[107] Poetry, Merton argued, because of the natural affinity between the aesthetic and mystical experiences, can be a positive help in active contemplation.[108] But it can prove to be a "fatal handicap"[109] in so far as it prevents a man from advancing to true contemplation, and for this reason the only course for the poet who is serious about his sanctification is "the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art."[110] In the revised essay, while retaining the essentials of this argument, Merton backs away from insisting that the poet be forced to an either/or choice between poetry and mystical contemplation. There may indeed arise particular cases in which a poet is convinced that it is God's will that he sacrifice his art, but there are other cases, exemplified by someone like St. John of the Cross, where poetry and mystical contemplation are not only not mutually exclusive but actually complement one another.[111] Merton therefore leaves open the possibility that human activity--in this case poetry--can be positively related to the highest experience in which a man can participate, mystical contemplation.

This rather subtle alteration in Merton's poetic theory relates to the larger patterns of change which had taken place in his thought, especially with respect to society. While not minimizing the importance of Divine intervention, Merton began to emphasize more the need for human action. Through his anti-poetry he was, implicitly at least, acknowledging the "uses" of poetry--perhaps against his own better judgment--[112]and in so doing showing the extent to which he was committed to the idea of taking direct action against social evils.

Original Child Bomb is one of the most powerful satires of 20th century American literature. This slim volume, subtitled "points for meditation to be scratched on the walls of a cave," published in 1961, has proved difficult to classify. May Swenson, reviewing the book in Poetry, called it prose.[113] The publishers designated it as poetry. A compromise can be reached, which does the work perfect justice, by calling it a prose-poem. The form is prose; the tone is poetry.

The work is made up of forty-one brief paragraphs, which, in turn, are composed of short, simple sentences remarkable for their studied blandness. The satire is a narrative, thriving on understatement, which recounts the circumstances surrounding the dropping of the first atomic bomb by the United States. The time the narrative takes place is long after that event, and the narrator, one of the few survivors in a devastated world--the inevitable outcome of Hiroshima--tells, step by step, of the event with which it all began, and ended. The characters of this surrealistic-like drama--the politicians, scientists, generals and admirals--come and go without flourish, speaking staidly and succinctly. They are preeminently business-like; being good Americans, they "got the job done." Indeed, it was their unreflective efficiency which established the tragedy of the situation. This terrible event of incalculable consequences was looked upon by most of its participants primarily as a job, a highly specialized and uniquely difficult job to be sure, but a job nonetheless. Pragmatism had won out over humanism.[114]

> 40. As to the Original Child that was now born, President Truman summed up the philosophy of the situation in a few words. "We found the bomb," he said, "and we used it."[115]

Merton published Emblems of a Season of Fury in 1963. Only about half of the book is devoted to Merton's poems; the other half is divided between an essay-letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra[116] and Merton's translations of one French and five South American poets. Merton had come to take a great interest in Latin American poets and poetry, in great part because, as we have seen, he detected in the Latins a dynamic concern for the world in which they live. His knowledge of this subject was far from superficial, and he was considered by one scholar to have had a more profound understanding of it than any other living writer;[117] his translations of the Latin poets were "without equal in the literature of the United States, or, for that matter, in world literature."[118]

Merton's poems in this volume continue to display the concerns which dominated his earlier works: the dehumanization of man in the face of technology, the ubiquitous (and interconnected) dangers of materialism and war, and--overriding all--the ominous possibility of an imminent apocalypse. The anti-urban theme is given further elaboration in poems such as, "And So Goodbye to Cities." We learn here that the culture which the modern city represents is in its waning stages,

> For cities have grown old in war and fun.
> The sick idea runs riot.[119]

The last book of poetry Merton published before he died was Cables to the Ace, a book in which he was completely the anti-poet. In the prologue--or perhaps "anti-prologue" is the more apt term--he declares that he "has changed his address and his poetics are on vacation. He is not roaring in the old tunnel."[120] Merton may not have been "roaring in the old tunnel," that is, using conventional poetic forms, but he was roaring nonetheless. Though not without its humor, this book represents Merton's most acrid commentary on contemporary society. Merton's consternation over the tendencies toward nihilism in a culture dedicated to the idolization of technology is clearly evident here, as is his deep pessimism over the inability of men to see their sad condition for what it is.

> "Hats off," cried the midget. "Hats off to the human condition."[121]

NOTES

[1] Merton, "Preface to Japanese Edition of The Seven Storey Mountain," unpub. in English.

[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in Essays, First Series (Philadelphia, 1890), p. 64. "A foolish consistency," Emerson wrote, "is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

[3] Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York, 1959), p. 120.

[4] Merton, letter to friends, summer, 1967, unpublished.

[5] "The atmosphere," Merton wrote to a friend, "is not unlike what I remember from the Germany of 1932." Ltr. to E. E., Linz, unpublished.

[6] Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York, 1966), p. 110, and passim.

[7] Merton, Faith and Violence (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 47 ff.

[8] Ibid., p. 69 ff.

[9] Merton, "A Martyr for Peace and Unity: Father Max Josef Metzger (1887-1944)," unpublished.

[10] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable (New York, 1966), p. 45.

[11] Ibid., p. 46.

[12] See: Gordon Zahn, German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control (New York, 1962).

[13] Merton, Seeds of Destruction (New York, 1964), p. 321.

[14] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 159.

[15] Aelred Graham, O.S.B., "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," Atlantic, 191:1 (January 1953), p. 71.

[16] Ibid., p. 73.

[17] Ibid., p. 73.

[18] Graham, "The Mysticism of Thomas Merton," Commonweal, 62: 6 (May 13, 1955), p. 159.

[19] Merton, Seeds of Contemplation (New York, 1949), pp. 41-42.

[20] Merton, Disputed Questions (New York, 1960), p. viii.

[21] Ibid., p. 127.

[22] Merton, Letter to Friends, Septuagesima Sunday, 1967, unpublished.

[23] "Fr. Louis' [Thomas Merton] own evaluation of his books," an unpublished chart, drawn by Merton, in the Bellarmine-Ursuline College library, Louisville, Kentucky.

[24] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 2.

[25] Merton, of course, was not the first thinker to treat society in metaphorical terms. One recalls Hobbes' "Leviathan," representing the sovereign power of the state.

[26] Merton, Raids, p. 54.

[27] Ibid., p. 56.

[28] Ibid., p. 56.

[29] Ibid., p. 57.

[30] Julien Benda, *La Trahison des Clercs* (Paris, 1927).

[31] *Contemporary Authors*, vols. 5-6 (Detroit, 1963), p. 298.

[32] Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 146.

[33] Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 73.

[34] Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York, 1959), p. 249.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 251.

[36] "Mr. Truman was a vice president who became president by accident when his predecessor died of a cerebral hemorrhage." *Original Child Bomb* (New York, 1961), non-paginated.

[37] Merton, Letter to S. E. Petropo[illegible], Brazil, unpublished.

[38] Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 174.

[39] Merton, Advent-Christmas letter to friends, 1967, unpublished. Though often caustic in his comments on politicians, Merton, just as often, sympathized with them. "Personally," he wrote, "I am willing to give them top marks for effort. They have certainly tried to make it all seem reasonable, and at moments they have appeared to succeed." *Conjectures*, p. 174.

[40] U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary in Kennedy administration.

[41] See: Edward Teller, *Our Nuclear Future: Facts, Dangers and Opportunities* (New York, 1958). Merton wrote to a friend--whether in reference to this particular book or not I am not sure--"Dr. Teller's book seems to me to be a systematic piece of amorality." Ltr. to L. S., Washington, unpublished.

[42] Herman Kahn, On Thermonuclear War (Princeton, N. J., 1960).

[43] C. Vann Woodward shares Merton's concern for the dangers of moralistic thinking. "The irony of the moralistic approach, when exploited by nationalism, is that the high motive to end injustice and immorality actually results in making war more amoral and horrible than ever and in shattering the foundations of the political and moral order upon which peace has to be built." The Burden of Southern History (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), p. 207.

[44] Merton, Breakthrough to Peace (New York, 1962), p. 105, 116; Conjectures, p. 215 ff; Faith and Violence, p. 150 ff.

[45] Merton, Conjectures, p. 217.

[46] Norman Jacobs, ed., Culture for the Millions? (Beacon ed., Boston, 1964), p. 59.

[47] Merton, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility," Commonweal, LXXV: 20 (February 9, 1962), p. 511.

[48] Merton, "The Pasternak Affair," in Disputed Questions, p. 3 ff, 291 ff.

[49] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, pp. 319-20.

[50] Merton, Conjectures, p. 141.

[51] From unpublished English version of Preface to Japanese Edition of The Seven Storey Mountain.

[52] Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (New York, 1961), p. 30.

[53] "Myth" understood as an "ill-founded belief held uncritically especially by an interested group." (Webster)

[54] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 154.

[55] Conjectures, p. 23 ff.

[56] Merton, Letter to F. L., December 3, 1967, unpublished.

[57] Contemporary Authors, p. 298.

[58] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 310.

[59] Carl G. Jung, The Undiscovered Self (Mentor ed., New York, 1958), p. 68.

[60] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 280.

[61] Merton, "The Other Side of Despair," in Mystics and Zen Masters (New York, 1967), pp. 255-280.

[62] Merton, "Answers for H. Lavin Cerda," August, 1967, unpublished.

[63] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 226.

[64] Ibid., p. 226.

[65] Ibid., p. 256 ff.

[66] Ibid., p. 230.

[67] Merton, Redeeming the Time (London, 1966), p. 25.

[68] Merton, The Ascent to Truth (New York, 1951), p. 17, and passim.

[69] Merton, Redeeming the Time, p. 25; see also, Faith and Violence, p. 269.

[70] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 193.

[71] The statement was made by Francis P. Matthews, on August 25, 1950; quoted in David Horowitz, The Free World Colossus (London, 1965), p. 95. A more

recent illustration of the mentality Merton was referring to here is found in a statement made by Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia. Referring to the possibility of an all-out nuclear war with Russia, and its consequences, he said: "If we have to start over again with another Adam and Eve, I want them to be Americans; and I want them on this continent and not in Europe." Quoted in the Minneapolis Tribune, March 30, 1969, p. 3C.

[72] Merton, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," Harper's Magazine (November 1966), p. 36.

[73] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 256.

[74] Ibid., p. 197. Merton thought that J. J. Altizer was one Death of God theologian who stood against these dangerous tendencies within the movement; see Ibid., p. 256.

[75] In terms of the dichotomization which took place within the Catholic Church after Vatican II, between liberals or progressives, and conservatives or traditionalists, Merton aligned himself with the former. He disliked labels, however, and he was as apt to criticize liberals as conservatives.

[76] Merton, "Regain the Old Monastic Charism," National Catholic Reporter, IV: 11 (January 11, 1968), p. 11.

[77] Merton, Seasons of Celebration (New York, 1965), p. 231 ff.

[78] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 208.

[79] Ibid., p. 255.

[80] Not in the ordinary sense, at any rate. However, Merton held that there was a certain kind of despair, "of men and of their plans," which did not preclude hoping "for the impossible answer that lies beyond our earthly contradictions." Raids on the Unspeakable, pp. 60-61.

[81] Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 180.

[82] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 306.

[83] Dorothy Day, "Thomas Merton, Trappist, 1915-1968," The Catholic Worker, XXXIV: 10 (December 1968), p. 6.

[84] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 244.

[85] Bernard DeVoto, ed., The Portable Mark Twain (New York, 1946), p. 15.

[86] This statement, as applied to Merton, must be understood in light of what I said in the preceding paragraph, that Merton never contradicted himself in any glaring way. He was not, in other words, "on both sides of any question" if the question happened to deal with something essential, e.g., his belief in God and commitment to Christianity.

[87] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 53 ff.

[88] Merton, Faith and Violence, pp. 154-55.

[89] *Ibid.*, Part Four, *passim*.

[90] Speaking of "theologians," Merton wrote to a friend: "I put quotation marks in so far as I dare to include myself under that heading." Ltr. to J. T. E., Washington, unpublished.

[91] Merton, Blessed Are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence (Nyack, N. Y., 1967).

[92] Merton, Conjectures, p. 181.

[93] *Ibid.*, p. 214 ff.

[94] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 76.

[95] The Seven Storey Mountain, The Waters of Siloe, Exile Ends in Glory, and What Are These Wounds?

[96] Theodore Roszak, ed., The Dissenting Academy (New York, 1968).

[97] Harvey G. Cox, "The 'New Breed' in American Churches: Sources of Social Activism in American Religion," Daedalus (Winter 1967), p. 147.

[98] Merton, Selected Poems (New York, 1959).

[99] Merton was constantly being asked to write books, articles, prefaces, reviews, whatever; and he tried to honor as many of these requests as possible.

[100] Quoted in Stefan Baciu's "Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton," Revue de Litterature Comparee, XLI: 2 (Avril-Juin 1967), p. 292.

[101] Ibid., p. 292.

[102] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 166.

[103] I am indebted to Mr. Ron Seitz, a personal friend of Merton's, for pointing out to me that Merton looked upon his anti-poetry as a form of protest.

[104] Merton was aware that his knowledge in this field was not wide. He wrote: "Doubtless I am not in a position to give a sweeping critical judgement of the poets of the United States at the present moment as I do not get to read them except for a few." Quoted in Stefan Baciu's article, "Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton," p. 293.

[105] See: Robert Bly and David Ray, A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War (Madison, Minn., 1966).

[106] Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse (New York: 1947), p. 96.

[107] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 139.

[108] Ibid., p. 101 ff., and passim.

[109] Ibid., p. 108.

[110] Ibid., p. 110.

[111] Merton, Selected Poems, p. 131 ff.

[112] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 168 ff. Merton says in this passage: "The artist must serenely defend his right to be completely useless."

[113] May Swenson, "Poetry Chronicle," Poetry, vol. 102 (May 1963), pp. 120-21.

[114] A passage from one of Merton's articles written about a year after Original Child Bomb was published throws some interesting light on the work. "A simple study of the steps which led to the dropping of the first A-bomb on Hiroshima is devastating evidence of the way well-meaning men, the scientists, generals and statesmen of a victorious nation, were guided step by step, without realizing it, by the inscrutable "logic of events" to fire the shot that was to make the Cold War inevitable and prepare the way inexorably for World War III." Breakthrough to Peace, p. 103.

[115] Merton, Original Child Bomb (New York, 1961), non-paginated.

[116] Nicaraguan poet, intellectual; editor of La Prensa of Managua. See: Merton's Emblems of a Season of Fury (New York, 1963), p. 93 ff.

[117] Baciu, "Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton," p. 292.

[118] Ibid., p. 294.

[119] Merton, Emblems of a Season of Fury, p. 7.

[120] Merton, Cables to the Ace (New York, 1968), p. 1.

[121] Ibid., p. 18.

CHAPTER III

WAR AND RACE

"I think two issues in this country are extremely serious: one, the race issue, two, the issue of nuclear war. The second one is worse than the first but both of them are pretty bad."[1] Thus, Merton defined the area in which he felt his social involvement must be concentrated. Though his interest in war and race was prompted mainly by the conviction that these were the issues of the 1960's, he was not facing them for the first time. When, after 1960, he began to treat extensively of these issues in his writings he was in fact returning to two subjects with which he had had long familiarity and to which he had given a considerable amount of thought.

Merton, ever since he was old enough to think seriously about the nature of society, had been against war, not simply in the vague, emotional way in which most men are against war, but as an integral part of his social philosophy. War was seen by him as obsolete, an unnecessary evil which was allowed to persist in modern times because men had become habituated to the illusion that it was a solution to their problems. He felt it was imperative that men be freed from that illusion. Merton no doubt owed his anti-war attitude in great part to the influence of his family. His maternal grandparents, whom he admired deeply, and with whom he lived while an undergraduate at Columbia, were strong pacifists. It was they who, earlier, had dissuaded Merton's father from joining the British army and fighting in World War I.[2] Another influential factor was that Merton came of age during the 1930's, when anti-war sentiments were a part of the intellectual atmosphere. To be a pacifist at Columbia in 1936 was not unexceptional.[3] As we have seen, his opposition to war had much to do with his association with Communism. It was during his affiliation with the Party that Merton took the Oxford Pledge, "that he would not fight in any war whatever."[4] Merton's anti-war attitude, therefore, was firmly grounded in the influences and experiences of his youth. It was not something hastily arrived at late in his life in response to the realities of the 1960's.

From the time of his undergraduate days when he was actively against war until the period after 1960 when once again, this time mainly through his writing, he resumed his activism, there was a long period when Merton kept silent about his sentiments. His acceptance of the Catholic faith in 1938 implied adherence to the traditional "just war theory." This, as he describes in The Seven Storey Mountain, subsequently entailed a revision of his thinking on the subject of war, a revision having repercussions more than purely academic because at that time, 1941, Merton was on the verge of being drafted. "If I had objected to the war before," he said, "it was more on the basis of emotion than anything else."[5] Now, within the framework of the "just war theory," it was incumbent upon him to come to some hard conclusions about the morality of World War II. Could he, in good conscience, involve himself in it as an active participant? It seemed to him that the circumstances surrounding the war were such that it was impossible for any man to wade through their complexity and arrive at a clear judgment concerning its morality. Presuming, therefore, that the men in Washington knew what they were doing--a presumption he would not make as easily in later years--he decided that if he were called to serve, because he had no firm conviction that it was his moral duty not to serve, he would answer the call. He concluded that, though there were ambiguities, the war was justified in terms of defense. Concerning the methods used in the war, however, "there was little doubt about [their] immorality."[6] He therefore would enter the army only as a non-combatant objector; he was determined "not to drop bombs on open cities, or shoot at other men."[7]

As it turned out, Merton joined the Trappists before he was drafted and thus never had the chance to implement his decision. Apart from the fact that he had concluded that his personal participation in it could be justified, Merton was opposed to the war in general. Though he saw clearly the cynicism of Hitler, he was not altogether convinced that those who opposed him were without blemish.[8] He felt very uneasy about the United States entering the war. There were two reasons for this. In the first place, Merton suspected that the interests that would really be protected by U.S. involvement would be those clustered around what we have come today to identify as the "military-industrial complex."

> And if we go into the war, it will be first of all to defend our investments, our business, our money. In certain terms it may be useful to defend all these things . . . but if anybody holds up American business as a shining example of justice, or American politics as a shining example of honesty and purity, that is really quite a joke![9]

The second reason Merton opposed American entry into the war--this was all, incidentally, before Pearl Harbor--is very interesting, and, depending upon one's point of view, perhaps not a little prophetic. Merton contended that if the U.S. would go to war against Hitler, it would, in order to defeat him, have to become like him; that is, it would have to adopt his immoral means of waging war. The U.S., then, in victory, would "turn into something just as dirty as he is,"[10] and there would not be much advantage, therefore, "for the world at large, in our winning this war."[11] We can detect here an ambivalence in Merton's attitude toward war which was to persist throughout the course of his life. Although the rational side of him could find reasons to justify specific wars, given certain circumstances, the nonrational side rejected all war as an inadmissible solution to human problems. He had said that his attitude toward war before his conversion had been based on emotion; this, for one part of him, did not cease to be the case thereafter.

Merton, in opposing U.S. entry into World War Two, did not represent a voice crying in the wilderness. There were a number of Americans at the time, many of them prominent, who for various reasons thought that the U.S. should not involve itself in the struggle. In January, 1941 Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana pleaded in congress against the passage of Roosevelt's lend-lease bill. Passage of the legislation, he said, meant war. "I, therefore, ask the American people before they supinely accept it, was the last World War worthwhile?"[12] Perhaps the most famous of the opponents of American involvement in the war was Charles A. Lindbergh. Lindbergh, for whom the war was a "fiasco," argued against those American interventionists who proposed that it was this country's duty to enter a European war. Though not designating the "idealist" viewpoints from which the merits of the war could be argued, he claimed that his main concerns were practical. The chief facts to be considered were that France had already lost, England--prevailing propaganda to the contrary --was losing, and the U.S. could not win a war on the continent of Europe. Furthermore, she had no business in Europe in the first place; her duty was to protect the Western Hemisphere.[13] Over a hundred million people in this nation, Lindbergh claimed, "are opposed to entering the war."[14]

War, as a general evil, though never fully discussed, was neither never fully absent from Merton's early writings, that is to say, these preceding 1960. One of the chapters of the widely read Seeds of Contemplation (1949) was entitled, "The Root of War is Fear."[15] In this chapter Merton treats war in a very abstract way. This approach was characteristic of his unworldly stage, when society and its wars were things rather far away, things which Merton had turned his back upon in order to set out on the road to spiritual perfection. The emphasis in this stage is not so much on war as a sociological reality as upon the individual psychology of men from which wars emanate. Wars are caused because men fear one another; men fear one another because they do not love one another; and men do not love one another because they do not love God, Whom, because of their completely de-spiritualized condition they do not even know. War will be eliminated, therefore, only when men once again become atuned to the spiritual dimension of their existence. Merton was never to abandon this paradigm completely, but in his later writings he was to change the emphasis and devote more emphasis to the sociological aspects of war.

What caused Merton, sometime around 1960, to decide that he could no longer deal with war as an abstraction and that he must devote all his energies opposing the concrete reality? Primarily, it was the danger of nuclear warfare. Just as Merton had been moved to become more involved with social issues generally by his study of the evolution of totalitarianism in Germany,[50] so his specific activism with regard to war was in great part traceable to his familiarity with the "nuclear realists," that is, those who could discuss nuclear war as if it were any other war, when in reality they were toying with the possibility of "an all-out preemptive nuclear attack involving mass destruction of civilians."[16] These cool, calculating thinkers--men like Herman Kahn, Edward Teller and Roswell Gilpatric --were highly educated and preeminently sane, but their sanity, Merton argued--as with someone like Adolf Eichmann--was turned upside-down. It was a "sanity," that is, which ultimately revealed itself 7 in the perfect logic of nihilistic thinking. Merton would consider someone like Teller to be an intellectual who had turned over his talents to the services of "them," those men of power who sought to gain control over "the others," the vast majority of mankind. It was therefore up to Merton, and other intellectuals who were not in "their" service to stand up and make a case for true sanity before it was too late. The intellectuals had a solemn obligation to save mankind from the inevitable outcome of nihilistic thinking.

Merton's anti-war sentiments had been clearly demonstrated at the time of World War Two. While this country was engaged in the Korean War, Merton was in his unworldly stage. War had to do with politics, and "it would be outside the scope of [his] present vocation if [he] tried to make any political analysis of anything."[17] By the time the war in Vietnam had gained momentum, however, Merton was fully committed to a new kind of worldliness, and he spoke strongly against this "overwhelming atrocity."[18] The war was clearly "immoral and eminently hurtful to American interests."[19] The motives behind American involvement, indeed precipitation of this war, were somewhat different from those he had detected for World War Two, at least the emphasis was different. Although he did not deny that, as was the case in 1941, selfish economic considerations were a factor, the more important factor was the moralistic interpretation the United States had attached to its role in present world history. The United States, fabricating for itself a "mythical and inadequate self-understanding made up of the postures and antics of TV westerns,"[20] had begun self-righteously to conceive of itself as the last true hope for goodness left in the world. "Overstimulated by [these] frenzied and dangerous fantasies,"[21] it had taken upon itself the duty to protect "democracy" and the interests of the "free world" wherever they might be considered to be endangered, even though, as was the case in Vietnam, the U.S. was destroying the country in order to save it.[22] The United States may "win" in Vietnam, "but the price may be so high that there will be few left around to enjoy the fruits of victory and democracy in a country which we will, of course, obligingly reconstruct according to ideas of our own."[23]

Merton's opposition to the Vietnam war came at a time, as indicated in the preceding chapter, when there was a general revivification among the nation's intellectuals with respect to social involvement. In the late 1930's, Merton could speak of his choice of the academic life as a choice of a virtual monastic retirement, away from the distractions and turmoil of society. By the mid-1960's many academic intellectuals had an entirely different conception of their role. Far from being a retreat from the "active and worldly life of conflict and competition,"[24] the life of the intellectual was conceived of as one of involvement and confrontation. Merton's idyllic conception of a life lived in "the selective peace of a college campus, reading and writing books,"[25] though by no means repudiated, was thought by many intellectuals of the 1960's to have to be balanced with a concern for what was going on in society at large, especially within the realm of politics. In this spirit, many American intellectuals began seriously to question, then to vociferously oppose, the Vietnam war, and, in connection with this, often review the entire rationale behind U.S. foreign policy. Among intellectuals engaged in such activity were men like Hans J. Morgenthau, Noam Chomsky, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and John Kenneth Galbraith.

Among the most critical contributions to the cause against war Merton felt he could make, as a priest and, at least with qualifications, a theologian, was to reevaluate the entire "just war theory" which for centuries had been the basis upon which the churches or individual Christians had been passing judgment on the morality of any given war. Merton had moved from his unquestioning acceptance of this theory, as a new convert, to a position where he felt that, for all its venerableness, it represented a distortion of true Christian teaching. The theory was traceable back to the fifth century and St. Augustine. Before Augustine, Merton pointed out, Christians had interpreted Christ's dicta that they should love their neighbors as themselves, and their enemies as well, as prohibitions against participating in any kind of violence, most particularly the violence of war. Merton cites works such as Clement of Alexandria's _Protreptic_ (1st century), Justin Martyr's _Apology_ (2nd century), St. Cyprian's _Ad Denatum_ (3rd century), and Tertullian's _De Ido_letaria (3rd century) to prove that for the first three centuries of its existence the Christian religion was chiefly characterized by an ethic of nonviolence.[26] Early Christians, for example, were prohibited by their leaders from serving in the Roman army because it was considered a sin to kill. Because of this reluctance to serve in the military, Christians were considered unpatriotic, or worse, traitors to the emperor, charges against which they had continually to defend themselves. Origen, in the third century had explained the rationale behind the Christian position:"No longer do we take the sword against any nations," he said, "nor do we learn war any more since we have become the sons of peace through Jesus who is our author, instead of following the traditional customs by which we were strangers to the covenant."[27] This, for Merton, should represent, to this day, the authentic position on war.

The four centuries old tradition of Christian nonviolence was not, Merton pointed out, eradicated single-handedly by St. Augustine in the 5th century. Two crucial events had set the stage for and contributed to the change in Christian thinking he was to formalize. One was the Battle of Milvian bridge, in 312 A.D., the outcome of which led to Constantine's official recognition of Christianity and its eventual incorporation into the Roman imperical establishment--

for Merton, the single most disastrous chapter in the history of Christianity. The other event was the sacking of Rome by Alaric the Goth in 411 A.D.[28] It was in the aftermath of these two events that Augustine's "just war theory" was formulated. The sad irony of Augustine's theory was that he had put as much emphasis upon the centrality of love for Christianity as did his predecessors; he tried to reconcile war with Christ's commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Faced with the recent sacking of Rome, Augustine reasoned that if the Empire collapsed so might too the church which was so closely bound up with it. Christians, therefore, might participate in a war to defend themselves against the heathens because by doing so they would be protecting their religion as well as their state. Would this violate the Christian injunction to love one's neighbor? No, for in a war which was justified in these terms the Christian, even though he kill, was not ceasing to love, in this case, even his enemy. But Augustine moved beyond purely defensive wars and suggested that there might be cases where Christians might have to take the initiative in wars for the sake of the faith. "Love," Augustine argued, "does not exclude wars of mercy waged by the good."[29]

Merton did not deny that there were not many cases in the history of Christianity when certain of the circumstances surrounding a war were as clear-cut as Augustine had originally envisioned them, when, for example, it was an evident case of aggression and one could, indeed must, in good conscience, engage in a defensive war. Merton, though he vacillated on this issue, could never, for all his objections to it, dispense with the "just war" theory in its entirety as having no applicability whatever. What Merton considered dangerous about the theory was its going beyond strictly defensive considerations. This aspect of the theory had inculcated into Christian thinking on war, a mentality which was to issue in the self-righteous stance characterized by the mindless claim that "God is on our side"--the ultimate corruption of the attempt to rationalize the justice of one's position. It was this mentality which, regarding the Vietnam war, explained a Catholic bishop's assuring President Johnson that U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was "a sad and heavy obligation imposed by the mandate of love,"[30] and Billy Graham declaring the conflict to be a "spiritual war between good and evil."[31] It was time, Merton argued, to break away from the deadly influence of Augustine's thought on war, and without necessarily returning to the primitive pacifism of the early Christians, at least attempt to recapture the purity of their respect, untainted by rationalization, of evangelical love.[32]

Merton felt that the Augustinian theory had revealed its innate weakness most clearly during the last few centuries. "We have seen," he said, "two world wars waged with a "will to peace" in order to "end wars." We have seen the immoral doctrine of unconditional surrender invoked as a sure guarantee of peace. And now, with the "will to peace" we are not unwilling to undertake the total destruction of continents."[33] Clearly, the theory had been reduced to absurdity. If mankind were to survive, one had now to start with the assumption, Merton argued, that war was simply no longer a solution for human problems, and therefore any attempt to justify it was patently wrong. This, at any rate, was Merton's guiding theme. When faced with the question whether or not a limited war of defense was ever justified he had difficulty being consistent. He admitted that it was possible to conceive of cases where such a war could be justified, at least hypothetically. But the whole spirit of Merton's attitude was directed away from specific instances and against the general mentality which held war to be a viable solution to human problems. If that mentality could be changed--which meant undercutting the strength of the "just war theory"--then one would not have to worry about specific instances. Moreover, Merton doubted that any war, given the ominous presence of nuclear weapons, could remain "limited" for long. What, he asked, is the difference between defense and offense, and who defines "limited" in an age of nuclear weapons?[34]

Merton was dismayed that, on so important an issue, there were so few theologians, Catholic or Protestant, who were speaking out on the moral implications of modern war. These men tended to be "altogether too scared of trouble, and take refuge in meaningless gestures, not even of righteousness but just of legality."[35] On the other hand, there were theologians like Rev. John Courtney Murray--whom Merton numbered among "our Catholic Herman Kahns"[36]--who perpetuated the "just war theory." One of the problems of those who, like himself, opposed this theory, is that "except for other theologians, they cannot get an audience."[37]

Merton was encouraged, however, that he was arguing for the authentic Christian position by the fact that the last three popes had strongly condemned various aspects of modern warfare, while theologians sat around preserving their reputations, until "they no longer have any reputations to preserve."[38] Merton noted Pius XII's 1954 denunciation of nuclear weapons,[39] John XXIII's encyclical letter, Pacem in Terris, published in 1963,[40] and Pope Paul's dramatic plea for "no more war!" before the United Nations General Assembly in the fall of 1965.[41] Merton was confident, therefore, that in questioning the Augustinian tradition he was not simply indulging in an eccentric diversion but rather participating in one of the essential aspects of Christian renewal.

Given his position as a Trappist monk, Merton's anti-war activity was limited to writing or to associating his name with anti-war organizations. He was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, PAX and SANE.[42] One of the most vexing problems Merton had to face when he began writing on the subject of war was censorship. In the early sixties, while working on a book of essays devoted entirely to the subject, he wrote to Dorothy Day asking her to pray "that the obstacles to this and the various difficulties may smooth themselves out."[43] A month later he wrote again and delineated the exact nature of the "obstacles" to which he had referred.

> Yesterday I mailed you a copy of the book which is not to be published: Peace in the Post Christian Era. My superiors, having been alerted by zealous individuals in the country, felt that I was "going too far" and getting away from the contemplative vocation into "dangerous ground", etc. etc. The book has

> not even been censored, just forbidden. I accept this with good will and I think humor, because there is a lot of irony in it after all.[44]

"Now here is the axe," he wrote to a friend. "The orders are, no more writing about peace."[45] The reasons given for this censorship, as he indicates, is that his writing about war/peace "falsifies" the monastic message.[46] It was obvious that Merton's superiors, unlike himself, had not arrived at a new conception of the role of the monk in society. No doubt, Merton was somewhat embittered by this action, which he considered "transparently arbitrary and uncomprehending,"[47] but in the end he accepted it with equanimity. He was convinced that nothing at all would be gained by his reacting to the censorship by walking out. This, he said, would merely be witnessing to a figment of his imagination rather than to the truth of the Church.[48] Eventually, the censorship was lifted, within the atmosphere of openness and freedom inaugurated by Vatican II. At first his Order simply "looked the other way" while he wrote for such organizations as the Catholic Peace Fellowship.[49] By the latter half of the 1960's, however, he enjoyed complete freedom to write on war, and published many things which had been held up earlier.

But censorship was not the only problem Merton had to face when he began to write on war. Merton often complained about the fact that as a result of his earlier writings, especially The Seven Storey Mountain--which, he remarked, had "become a kind of edifying legend"--he had been stereotyped as a "spiritual writer," that is, one who wrote extensively on unworldly subjects.[50] Merton claimed his right "not to be turned into a Catholic myth for children in parochial schools." None the less, the legend, as he himself admitted, was bigger than he was.[51] Many Catholics had accepted Merton as a "safe" Trappist monk living in the Kentucky hills, and they were unwilling to hear him speak out on subjects like war and race, especially if, as often happened, they did not agree with his views on these subjects.

One of the first, and most important, pieces Merton wrote on the subject of war was an article entitled "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility," which appeared in The Commonweal in February, 1962. This article was scheduled to appear earlier but it was held up by the censors, a fact which Merton considered providential because it ended by being printed the week of the General Strike for Peace.[52] In it, Merton berated Americans for their "almost total passivity and irresponsibility on the moral level," which was disguised under "demonic activism in social, military, and political life."[53] He claimed that the United States and the Soviet Union, in their attitudes toward nuclear weapons, were committed to a policy of genocide.[54] The article caused quite a stir.[55] The new Thomas Merton had emerged, and many Catholics were not pleased with the revelation. One *Commonweal* reader contended that Merton was simply "frightened to death that nuclear energy is going to cause the end of the world," and while "screaming at the top of his lungs" failed to offer one positive suggestion.[55] Merton stormed back at this criticism which he felt had missed his point entirely. His thesis, he reiterated, was ethical, not political: "that *uncontrolled destruction* of entire populations and regions with nuclear weapons . . . is morally inadmissible."[57]

Later that year, Morton said that he had received considerable criticism for pointing out that President Kennedy had strongly implied that the United States would strike first by his claim that "we may have to take the initiative" in the event of a nuclear war. Though Kennedy had denied the interpretation Merton attached to his statement, Merton thought that the possibility was still open. Presidents, he said, have been known to change their minds before.[58]

One particular incident illustrates dramatically the type of opposition Merton ran into, especially among Catholics, for his attitude toward war. In early 1968, Merton had supported a young conscientious objector in Louisville by writing a letter to the man's draft board on his behalf. In it he said: "As a spiritual adviser I have been consulted by Joseph Mulley, who is seeking to follow his conscience in opposition to war. I believe he has every right to do so and also believe that his rights are being unjustly denied him."[59] The reaction which Merton's letter drew from some of the Catholics of Louisville was swift and vicious. The pattern of the reaction seemed ironically to prove one of Merton's theses about the Cold War: that it has had the effect of obliterating rational thought and destroying morality; when people, East or West, speak of "right" and "wrong" they mean to indicate thereby simply the difference between their side (right) and the other side (wrong). The story of Merton's letter, with quotations, was first carried in The Record, the newspaper of the Louisville Catholic archdiocese on February 22, 1968, and the controversy was followed in subsequent issues. One man wrote to the paper that surely Merton knew that "the fight in Asia is against Godless Communism." And he wondered how Merton, "living a life of strict seclusion," managed to counsel a conscientious objector.[60] Another correspondent, after referring to his views on the war as "shameful doings", branded Merton's position as "immoral, reprehensible, disloyal, and a violation of his sacred duty and trust."[61] Still another claimed that it was "shocking beyond belief to read where Thomas Merton supports a conscientious objector," in a war which was obviously being fought to save the world from a Communist take-over.[62]

At this point, about three weeks after the controversy had begun, Merton thought it expedient that he write a letter to The Record, to clarify his position. He did not attempt to meet the various arguments his opponents had used--he had long since been convinced of the futility of this--but simply recounted a recent incident in which a Benedictine monastery in Hue, Vietnam, with which he had been in close contact, had been destroyed by American bombs. The monks who were not killed were forced to disperse throughout the country and only one, an exile in Laos, had been heard of since the incident. Merton said that this incident was symbolic of the total war effort in Vietnam, that in order to "save them from Communism" we were in fact destroying the Vietnamese.[63] In the same issue in which Merton's letter appeared another correspondent announced that he was burning his copy of The Seven Storey Mountain along with other books written "by this publicity seeking 'devout' priest." It was his opinion that The Record "should be reprimanded for giving so much prominence to these deplorable items."[64]

Merton's letter brought further negative reaction in later issues, although in a somewhat less vitriolic vein than that which had preceded. The main argument was basically the same: Thomas Merton fails to see that the war in Vietnam is a contest with Communism, and by siding with conscientious objectors he is at least indirectly aiding the Communist effort. One reader analyzed Merton's problem as an infection with the "philosophy of quantities" and the "morality of mathematics," by which he meant that Merton determined the unjust nature of the war simply by counting up the atrocities, rather than having a mind to the moral issues which were at stake. For himself, the writer had no doubts that the United States, a country concerning which he had "never noticed substantial evidence of any evil motive," was doing the honorable thing by intervening in Vietnam.[65]

In all, the controversy lasted five weeks, from February 22, the day on which the news story had appeared, until March 21, when the last letters on the subject were published. In four issues eleven letters on the subject had been printed, seven against Merton, the remaining for him. Most interesting about the four letters that supported Merton was that they supported him as a person; not one of the correspondents saw fit to agree with his views on the Vietnam war. The nature of the criticism Merton was exposed to on this occasion confirmed a generalization he had often made about the mentality of many contemporary Americans, especially the "good Catholics"--a term of opprobium used to designate those whose faith, in his estimate, made no real difference in their lives. Too many Americans, schooled in the simplistic thinking fostered by the Cold War, reacted in knee-jerk fashion to any conflict in the United States became involved in by interpreting it as a to-the-death battle against Communism.[66] Anyone who wavered from this interpretation was considered unpatriotic. Given Merton's sensitivity, and his deep affection for people, even those with whom he did not agree, the bitter nature of the criticism he received during this incident must have hurt him deeply. And yet, that was beside the point. "It is quite easy," he had written a few years earlier, "to please everyone. But in the long run the cost and the sorrow come very high."[67]

The year 1961 marked the beginning of a constant flow of literature from Merton's pen on the subject of war. It was in that year that the poignant anti-war prose-poem, Original Child Bomb was published. In 1962, the Commonweal article appeared, as well as the anthology of anti-war essays Breakthrough to Peace. Merton wrote the Introduction for the volume, besides contributing an essay, "Peace: A Religious Responsibility." In this essay, which tellingly displayed the depth of Merton's concern about the dangers of nuclear warfare, Merton argued against the spirit of the traditional Christian (i.e., Augustinian) teaching on war. His basic premise was that "nuclear war is totally unacceptable. It is immoral, inhuman, and absurd."[68] He forcefully exemplified this absurdity by carrying to their logical term the "rational" arguments of those who attempt to justify the use of nuclear weapons. These arguments inevitably lead, he pointed out, to a devasted world littered with "megacorpses,"--the end result of the monomaniac desire to "save" the planet for either Christianity or Communism. It was absolutely imperative to break away from the airy speculations about nuclear weapons, as theoretical figments, and to begin to look realistically at the horrible outcome of the use of nuclear weapons as facts. Merton advocated, by way of practical suggestion, an international control commission which would help to restore some sanity to this whole area. But a central control agency, or anything else, would be useless if it were not accompanied by a radical change of heart--a continually recurring theme in Merton--which would put human considerations first in any speculations about nuclear power. This necessary change of heart could best be accomplished by a revivification of Christian love and non-violence.

Besides dealing with the subject of war in his books, Merton also published in the 1960's a considerable number of articles, many of which appeared in The Catholic Worker. Some of his writings appeared in pamphlet form, published by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Among the titles were, "Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence," "The Root of War," "Dead or Red: the Anatomy of a Cliche," and "The Christian as Peacemaker."[69] In recognition of his work in the area of peace, Merton was awarded the Pax Medal in October, 1963 by the Massachusetts Political Action for Peace.

It is difficult to say precisely how effective were Merton's rather extensive writings on war and peace. Generally, Merton was not as well known and read in the 1960's, after he had begun writing on the subjects, as he had been in the 1950's when, at least among Catholic Americans, he had a very wide readership.[70] Whatever might have been the size of his audience, it is clear it was not unanimous in its opinions. Some, as exemplified by the Louisville incident, were bitterly opposed to his position and were willing to interpret it as a sign of moral deterioration. Others, mostly members of peace groups scattered throughout the country, admired Merton and often used his writings to buttress their own views. As for Merton himself, he was ambivalent toward not only what effects his writings might have had, but toward his whole involvement in the peace movement. Most often he would declare that it was imperative for him to continue to write as much as he could. But from time to time, bothered by the thought that it might be the "fighting for peace" that starts all the wars, he resolved to write less and concentrate more on contemplation. "If you are yourself at peace," he wrote, "there is at least some peace in the world."

Merton did not write nearly as much on the subject of race as he did on that of war, but it was the social issue, next to war, to which he devoted most of his attention. Like war, even though he did not begin writing about it extensively until the 1960's, race was not a subject to which Merton came late in his life. He had long been aware of the tragedy of the racial situation in the United States, and in the 1930's he saw the potential explosiveness of the Negro ghettoes, ghettoes which were clearly the creation of the dominant white society.[72] He was certain that there was "not a Negro in the whole place [Harlem] who can fail to know, in the marrow of his own bones, that the white man's culture is not worth the jetsam in the Harlem River."[73] It was Merton's sensitive description of Harlem in The Seven Storey Mountain that so deeply impressed Eldridge Cleaver that he copied it out in long hand and kept it on his person. The passage, Cleaver wrote, "had precisely the same effect on me that Elijah Mohammad's writings used to have, or the words of Malcolm X, or the words of any spokesman of the oppressed in any land."[74] When Merton was teaching English at St. Bonaventure's University in the spring of 1941 he made the acquaintance of Catherine de Hueck, a member of the Russian nobility who had come to this country after the Revolution and established a community center in Harlem. He was deeply impressed by the woman and the work she was doing--here was some one who was actively trying to combat the debilitating bourgeoise spirit which had infected Western

Christianity--and that summer he went to work for a few weeks at Friendship House on 135th Street in Harlem. In October Catherine de Hueck asked Merton if he wanted to come and work permanently in Harlem. He decided that this was the life to which he was called, and in anticipation of moving to Friendship House the following January, he resigned his position at St. Boneventure's, effective at the end of the fall semester 1941. It was the intervening conviction, arrived at in November, that his true calling was to become a monk that determined that Merton's life was to be spent among the hills of Kentucky rather than in the streets of Harlem.[75]

From a purely sociological point of view, there was nothing remarkably original about Merton's analysis of the racial situation in the United States. The facts, after all, were there for any intelligent man to see; the difference lay, with Merton, in the fact that he was often ahead of the pack on this issue. It is a tribute to the sharpness of Merton's vision that he was aware of many of the implications of the racial situation in America long before that situation attained the status of a national crisis. He did not need to wait for the Kerner Report of 1968[76] to tell him of the effects of white racism in this country, for, in the 1930's it was clear to him that it was white racism which had constructed the Negro ghettoes. The blacks of Harlem, Merton wrote,"were being forced to work out, in their own lives, a clear representation of the misery which has corrupted the ontological roots of the white man's own existence."[77]

Merton saw the racial crisis which exploded in the 1960's as the inevitable coming to a head of a long, totally immoral subjection of the Negro by the whites in this country. For a time, in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, the Negro thought that the white man, underneath all the subterfuge, was still basically trustworthy. But, Merton points out, when he saw, after the enactment of legislation which should have bettered his situation, that that situation remained the same because the white man was insincere and really did not want to give him his freedom, then he decided that his only recourse was to force. The cause, at that point, ceased ot be a "movement" and became a "revolution."[78] In a sense this was sad, Merton thought, because the nonviolent approach advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King was by far to be preferred. But that it failed was not surprising, given the fact that it is "perhaps the most exacting of all forms of struggle,"[79] and only a few, like Dr. King, have the qualities to remain loyal to it. The Negroes, therefore, are not to be blamed for giving it up as the chosen method for gaining their rights. What is more, the violence which the civil rights movement eventually espoused was an inheritance of the white culture to which Negroes had so long been subjected and influenced by. He congratulated Rap Brown for noting that this violence was as "American as cherry pie,"[80] although in doing so he put himself in the inconsistent position of congratulating the Negro for succumbing to a culture which he, Merton, had long denigrated.

The solution for the racial crisis in America was for Merton patently simple: the Negro must be given his full range of rights and opportunities as a citizen. This meant, in immediate and practical terms, that sufficient legislation had to be enacted to insure these rights and opportunities, but, more important, those laws, once passed, had to be implemented. The racial question for Merton was preeminently a moral question, but he did not consider the enactment of such legislation--in answer to a commonly heard argument against such action--as "legislating morality." "You will say: "You cannot legislate morality." That phrase may be quite true in its own proper context. But here it is not a question of "morality" but social order."[81] As we have already seen with regard to war, Merton believed that a permanent solution of the race problem, if possible, could only be brought about when there was a widespread change within men's hearts.

Merton was often pessimistic over the race question, but his pessimism probably made for a more accurate analysis of the situation than a more optimistic outlook might have produced. In Seeds of Destruction, one of the two books in which he extensively studies this question, Merton, writing in 1964, took a rather dim view of the future in the light of his assessment of the situation. He saw the only hope for the civil rights movement as resting in its Christian and non-violent elements.[82] The country, he said, is being given its last chance for peaceful change; but perhaps it is already too late. He predicted grimly that "we can now expect violent, though perhaps disorganized and sporadic, initiatives in force around the edges of the Negro slums."[83] Merton had mis-read the exact form this violence was going to take. Instead of being directed at the surrounding white communities it was concentrated within the ghettoes. Significantly, however, in places like Watts, California, it was the white, not the black, businesses within the ghetto which were struck. All in all, then, Merton's analysis of the situation was quite accurate, and his basic prediction of a violent out-break proved true. Historian Martin Marty had reviewed Seeds of Destruction in 1964 and condemned the book for what he regarded as its excessive pessimism. After the wide-spread violence of the summer of 1967, however, Marty returned to the book and revised his initial judgment. "What bothers me," he wrote in a review addressed to Merton, "is the degree of accuracy in your predictions and prophecies in general."[84]

Merton thought that it was imperative that the Negro take a leading role in his fight for full civil rights in this country. For too long the black man had been intimidated by white society into thinking that he was incapable of determining his own destiny. Now he must break free from not only the out-right oppression to which he had been subjected on the part of racists, but also from the deleterious psychological effects of the paternalistic concern shown by well-meaning but misguided white liberals.[85] Merton argued that one of the ways the American Negro could gain a much needed sense of identity would be to identify himself with the poor colored races throughout the world.[86] The Black Power movement in this country could also serve a useful function in helping the black man re-develop his identity. Concerning the question that the Black Power movement might be exhibiting a form of "racism in reverse," Merton was ambivalent. At one point he seemed to think, somewhat gratuitously, that the Black Power Movement was not really racist but was only pretending to be so to rile the white liberal and get him off the Negro's back.[87] Elsewhere Merton admitted that certain militant Negro groups are indeed fundamentally racist.[88] He was willing to admit to the temporary expedience of these racist characteristics, however, along with some of the violence, so long as they helped the black man attain his rightful place in society.

Merton was fully in accord, in the 1960's, with the aim of various black organizations of making the black man more proud of his blackness and of the culture and tradition of his race. It is interesting to contrast this attitude with one which he had expressed earlier, in 1940, when he said it depressed him to think how Negroes gathered together over coffee to talk about and admire things exclusively "Negro" because by doing so they were mimicking one of the worst traits of white culture.

> And then I got very sad, thinking how people who can do so many things instinctively, like playing pianos and dancing, should have to start imitating the dullest, stupidest tricks of all the crafty, snobbish, petty, absurd little groups that make up the rest of society. I thought of all the socialists walled up in their rooms praising socialist novels, and all the communists growling in their

> hutches the praises of communist novels, and then I thought of all the Catholics praising the works of some stuffed shirt who happened to be a Catholic, and I thought of the Jews praising novels by Jews, and my mind returned to the polite and soft-voiced and smiling and slightly awkward and intensely earnest Negroes gathered in fairly livable apartments on Edgecombe Avenue, talking about Native Son, but not really succeeding in being as stupid as the Communists and the Socialists and the Catholics and the Jews and everybody else. But give them time: they will succeed: they will get to be as dumb as we are.[89]

Merton's attitude here is best explained as a reaction, perhaps not fully conscious, against the "ghetto mentality" of many American Roman Catholics. At this time, Merton was a recent convert to Catholicism, a religion which he had come to love as much in its theology and tradition as he detested some of its sociological manifestations. From the very beginning, Merton was upset by those Catholics who, warmed by the conviction of self-righteousness, could abhor the thought of eating meat on Friday, while at the same time arguing for the "imprudence" of "admitting a Negro child to a parochial school for fear the white parents take away their children."[90] To enthuse over being a "Catholic" --or anything else--when such enthusiasm obliterates objective self-scrutiny was, for Merton, pathetic at best. "The Catholic," he wrote later, "who is the aggressive specimen of a ghetto Catholic culture, limited, rigid, prejudiced, negative, is precisely a non-Catholic."[91]

The role of the white liberal was singled out for special consideration, and blame, by Merton. He felt that the white liberal, for all his good intentions, and perhaps because of them, was standing in the way of the black man's progress toward full equality. His most glaring fault was the paternalistic influence which he wished to exert over the Negro. This paternalism, Merton argued, revealed that the white man, for all his protestations to the contrary, really believed that the Negro was inferior and that he, the white man, knew what was best for the Negro and was alone capable of guiding him to it. Perhaps too harshly, Merton thought that most liberals were involved in the civil rights movement merely to assuage their own sense of guilt rather than truly to help the black man, and that if it came down to risking the loss of their comfortable positions in society through their involvement, they would drop it immediately. The Negro, Merton claimed, clearly detected this ambivalent loyalty on the part of the white liberal and therefore, at bottom, did not trust him. It was the white liberal's unmitigated commitment to his culture, a culture which had subjugated the black man, which prevented him from seeing the situation exactly as it was and entering into a genuinely empathetic relationship with blacks. His most naive surmise was that the black man wanted to enter into and become a member of the white culture which had caused him so much suffering. Fundamental to all of the white liberal's problems, therefore, was a lack of sincerity toward the Negro; he was "not prepared to give him anything beyond fair promises and a certain abstract good will."[92]

This rather biting assessment of the white liberal was made in 1963, and, by and large, it was left to stand as first stated. By implication, the only solution Merton proposed for the white liberal's dilemma was that he become, in a sense, a non-white man, that is, he must completely repudiate the culture which had been guilty of so many sins against the Negro. Merton claimed that the only proper reaction of Southern whites to the Birmingham bombing of 1963 would have been to "cease to be the people they were. . . . They would have to die to their past, to their society with its prejudices and its inertia, die to its false beliefs, and go over to the side of the Negroes."[93] Merton admitted that for a Southern white this would be a real "death," but it was the action which all whites who were truly in earnest about their commitment to justice must take.

Merton's general approach to social problems--"not by analysis but by simplicity"[94]--was often sufficient to give him insights into the race issue which other, more scientifically-oriented thinkers, did not share. It did not always serve him well, however. He often allowed himself to be so persuaded by his own evaluations of the situation that those evaluations became co-terminous with objective facts. Merton's most common error was that he tended to stereotype the "Negro mind;" that is, he often assumed that it was possible to discern what American Negroes, a large heterogeneous group of people, were thinking, as a group, on a given subject at a given time. Merton never did this by way of disparaging the Negro--quite the contrary[95]--but it was stereotyping none the less and as such it served only to oversimplify a complex situation. What Merton was doing, in effect, in describing how Negroes thought on this or that subject, was transferring what he would have thought about a subject if he were a Negro to the collective mind of the American Negro as he imagined it. Thus, when he described all cultic movements within the black community as premised upon "a violent repudiation of white culture and everything it stands for,"[96] this was more an expression of Merton's own antipathy toward "white culture" than an accurate and provable assessment of the phenomenon he was discussing.

A chief cause of many of Merton's inaccurate generalizations about the race issue is the fact that he had a tendency to accept at face value what certain black writers, especially militants, had to say on many issues, as if theirs was the final and definitive word. For example, Merton says flatly that "the Negroes interpret the war in Asia as a color-war, in which they are asked to support white power in an attempt to subjugate colored people."[97] It is unquestionably true that a certain segment of the black population does hold this view; but how big a segment it is impossible to say. At any rate, there is too much contrary evidence--in terms of the numbers of Negroes, not draftees, engaged in the war--to accept this as a valid description of how "the Negroes," that is, the black population as a whole, interpret the conflict.

As with most things, Merton also attached symbolic significance to the race issue in America. He saw the Negro involved in something much wider than a fight for greater political liberties, although this was basic to his struggle. The Negro, chiefly because he was poor and down-trodden, stood as a fundamentally religious symbol for Merton. He represented all that remained noble and dignified in human nature because he was as yet not completely poisoned by a corrupt, dehumanized culture. The Negro was clearly the "good guy" as far as Merton was concerned. The white man, on the other hand, was the "bad guy," because he represented the affluent, technology-oriented, bourgeoise, secularized culture for which Merton had no love whatever. In collective terms, the Negro Revolution represented the kairos, or "providential time," of the black man in history. His time of destiny had arrived and his divinely-ordained mission was to stand in judgment of the corrupt culture of the white man. Merton, in 1948, had said that Harlem was a living symbol, standing in constant condemnation of white culture. "Harlem is there by way of a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown."[98] The open revolt of the Negro in the 1960's was but a fuller manifestation of that indictment, "a violent repudiation of white culture and everything it stands for."[99]

The sad plight of the white man in relation to the Negro struggle is explained by the fact that he has been severely damaged, psychologically and spiritually, by materialistic civilization to which he had pledged his loyalty. Now he was beginning to labor under the rightful guilt he felt for all the injustices he had perpetrated against the colored races throughout history in the process of building up that civilization. But despite the pathos of his condition, all was not lost for the white man. Merton argued, in agreement with Dr. Martin Luther King, that the time of kairos for the black man was equally so for the white man. The black man was bringing a message of salvation to the white man and if the latter were wise he would heed that message; it might well be the last chance he gets to save his soul.

> It must then be said that this most critical moment in American history is the providential "hour," the kairos not merely of the Negro, but of the white man. It is, or at any rate it can be, God's hour. It can be the hour of vocation, the moment in which, hearing and understanding the will of God as expressed in the urgent need of our Negro brother, we can respond to that inscrutable will in a faith that faces the need of reform and creative change, in order that the demands of truth and justice may not go unfulfilled.[100]

If there is some simplification, and perhaps even naivete, in certain of Merton's analyses of the race question in America, these short-comings are qualified by the fact that they were made in the effort toward attaining a greater degree of understanding among peoples. Merton was as sensitive as many American intellectuals to the suffering to which Negro citizens have been subjected, but unlike others, he was unable to accept this fact cooly. His interest in the Negro in America was personal. When he wrote about the Negro, he was more pleading a cause than describing a sociological phenomenon, and if he sometimes distorted the latter it was because he at all times so fervently believed in the former.

A common denominator to both war and the current race problem in America, for Merton, was the element of violence. For this reason, both problems were solvable ultimately only in terms of a personal conversion. Following Gandhi, Merton argued that violence, as the proper form of action, emanated from an individual only because that individual was basically disoriented with respect to his own proper identity; he did not know the truth about himself. Non-violence, on the other hand, was based upon a conviction of the truth, the truth about oneself first of all, and, secondly, about the world in general. The first step, therefore, toward the elimination of violence was to discover the truth in oneself--through a recognition of one's relation to God--which would be the necessary prelude to discovering the truth about society.[101]

Merton's admiration for Gandhi did much to influence him toward his more direct involvement in "worldly" affairs. In particular, it was his exposure to Ghandi's writing which did much toward mollifying his long kept aversion toward politics. Gandhi taught that politics and religion, the secular and the sacred, were not diametrically opposed and that in fact political involvement could perhaps be as much a religious activity as praying. Merton, though never converted completely to this view, changed his thinking to the degree that he allowed that politics need not necessarily be a detrimental form of activity and may in certain cases prove to be morally efficacious.[102]

Merton felt that one of the most insidious lies upon which the ethic of violence was based--a lie which has had much influence in recent history--was the idea of the irreversibility of evil. If one is convinced that sin cannot be forgiven--that evil is irreversible--then the only logical alternative is to destroy what one considers to be evil because there is no hope for its rehabilitation. In a social situation this view translates itself into a compulsion to do violence and perhaps even destroy those in opposition to one's own position because one considers it impossible that they can ever change. The violent man, in other words, be he an international "politician" or a domestic racist, looks upon the opposition as an enemy to be removed rather than as a brother to be loved. For the nonviolent man it is different. Because of his commitment to truth--to the point that he would choose to die rather than say what he does not mean--he begins with the premise that his own position may not be infallibly true.

"A test of our sincerity in the practice of nonviolence is this," Merton wrote: "are we willing to learn something from the adversary?"[103] The only "victory" the nonviolent wants to realize over those who oppose him, Merton taught, is that they too should come to see the truth that he has discovered, for indeed if it is _the_ truth it is not merely "his" truth, but the truth for all men. The nonviolent man, therefore, is seeking a resolution which will not benefit one side or the other but will benefit everyone involved.[104]

NOTES

[1] Merton, Letter to Friends, undated, unpublished. This letter was a mimeographed statement sent by Merton to people who wrote and asked him questions on a number of subjects. It was compiled around 1966.

[2] James Shelley, "Owen Merton, R.B.A.," Art in New Zealand, II:8 (June 1930), p. 232.

[3] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: 1948), p. 144.

[4] Ibid., p. 147, 144.

[5] Ibid., p. 311.

[6] Ibid., p. 312.

[7] Ibid., p. 312.

[8] "Washington," he wrote in his journal on May 23, 1941, "is full of weak tricks." The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton (New York, 1959), p. 220.

[9] Ibid., p. 101.

[10] Ibid., p. 130.

[11] Ibid., p. 251.

[12] This address was made on January 12, 1941. Congressional Record, 77th Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, pp. 178 ff. Quoted in Twentieth Century America, J. Joseph Hutchmacher (Boston, 1966), p. 323.

[13] Twentieth Century America, p. 312 ff.

[14] Ibid., p. 315.

[15] Merton, Seeds of Contemplation (New York, 1949), p. 56 ff.

[16] Merton, Race, Peace and Rights: Miscellaneous Papers, 1963-1967 (October, 1967), unpublished.

[17] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 141-42.

[18] Merton, Faith and Violence (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 87 ff.

[19] Merton, Letter to F. L. (December 3, 1967), unpublished.

[20] Merton, Faith and Violence, pp. 36-37.

[21] Ibid., p. 45.

[22] Merton, Letter to the editor, The Record (Louisville, Ky.), 90: 11 (March 14, 1968), p. 5.

[23] Merton, Faith and Violence, pp. 89-90.

[24] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 188.

[25] Ibid., p. 188.

[26] Merton, Seeds of Destruction (New York, 1964), p. 134.

[27] Ibid., p. 159.

[28] Ibid., p. 142 ff.

[29] Ibid., p. 147. For Merton's discussion of the Augustinian theory, see Ibid., p. 141 ff.

[30] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 91.

[31] Ibid., p. 91.

[32] It was not that Merton did want to see a return to primitive Christian pacifism, but he realized it was practically impossible.

[33] Merton, *Peace in the Post Christian Era* (ca. 1963), unpublished.

[34] *Ibid*.

[35] Merton, Letter to J. F., Harts Island, unpublished.

[36] Merton, Letter to W. H. F., Santa Barbara, unpublished.

[37] Merton, *Race, Peace and Rights*, unpublished.

[38] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, 1966), p. 271.

[39] Merton, ed., *Breakthrough to Peace* (New York, 1962), p. 97, 90.

[40] Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York, 1964), p. 162 ff., and, Part Two, Section One, *passim*.

[41] Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 40, 46, 22.

[42] *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 5-6 (Detroit, 1963), p. 298.

[43] Letter from Merton to Dorothy Day quoted in *The Catholic Worker*, XXXIV: 10 (December, 1968), p. 6.

[44] This letter also quoted in *Ibid*., p. 6.

[45] Merton, Letter to J. F., New York, unpublished.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] *Ibid*.

[48] Merton, second letter to J. F., New York, unpublished.

[49] Merton, Letter to J. H., Nyack, N. Y. unpublished.

[50] Contemporary Authors, vol. 5-6, p. 298.

[51] Thomas P. McDonnell, "An Interview With Thomas Merton." Motive (October 1967), p. 33.

[52] Merton, "Thomas Merton on the Strike" (letter), Catholic Worker, XXVIII:2 (February 1962), p. 7.

[53] Merton, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility." The Commonweal, LXXV: 20 (February 9, 1962), p. 511.

[54] Ibid., p. 509.

[55] Merton, Letter to J. F., Washington, unpublished.

[56] Joseph G. Hill, Letter to the editor, The Commonweal, LXXV (April 20, 1962), p. 84.

[57] Merton, "The Author Replies," Ibid., p. 85.

[58] Merton, "Ethics and War: a Footnote," Catholic Worker, XXVIII: 9 (April 1962), p. 2.

[59] Quoted in The Record (Louisville, Ky.) 90: 8 (February 22, 1968), p. 1.

[60] Sam. L. Draper, Letter to the editor, The Record, 90: 9 (February 29, 1968), p. 5.

[61] Margaret Mary Riley, Letter to the editor, The Record, 90: 10 (March 7, 1968), p. 5.

[62] John M. Hennessey, Letter to the editor, Ibid., p. 5.

[63] Merton, Letter to the editor, The Record, 90: 11 (March 14, 1968), p. 5.

[64] Robert H. Jutt, Letter to the editor, Ibid., p. 5.

[65] Joseph L. Williamson, Letter to the editor, The Record, 90: 12 (March 21, 1968), p. 5.

[66] Merton, addressing himself to this mentality, stated: "It is assumed, quite gratuitously, that the communist is at the gates, and is just about to take over the United States, close all the churches, and brainwash all the good Catholics." Breakthrough to Peace, p. 96.

[67] Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (New York, 1961), p. 32.

[68] Merton, Breakthrough to Peace, p. 91.

[69] See bibliography.

[70] The Seven Storey Mountain was a best seller in 1949. See Alice Payne Hackett's, 70 Years of Best Sellers (New York, 1967). Mr. James Laughlin, publisher of New Directions Publishing Corporation (which put out twenty Merton titles) said: "Seeds of Contemplation [1949] was far and away the Merton best seller on our list." Since that book the Merton titles generally did not do as well. Letter to the author, April 11, 1969.

[71] Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 181, and p. 180 ff.

[72] Merton, The Secular Journal, p. 237 ff.

[73] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 346.

[74] Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York, 1968), p. 35.

[75] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 339 ff., p. 358 ff.

[76] Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York, 1968). The report stated: "White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II." Ibid., p. 10.

[77] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 346.

[78] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 28 ff., and Part One, *passim*.

[79] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 14.

[80] *Ibid*., p. 123.

[81] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 20.

[82] *Ibid*., p. 55.

[83] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[84] Martin Marty,"To: Thomas Merton. Re: Your Prophecy," National Catholic Reporter (August 30, 1967), p. 6.

[85] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 121 ff.

[86] *Ibid*., pp. 135, 128.

[87] *Ibid*., p. 124, 127.

[88] *Ibid*., p. 169.

[89] Merton, The Secular Journal, p. 38.

[90] *Ibid*., p. 32.

[91] Merton, Letter to B. S., Notre Dame, unpublished.

[92] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 6. For a full discussion of Merton's views on the white liberal see, "Letters to a White Liberal," in *Ibid*., p. 3 ff., also Part Three of Faith and Violence, *passim*.

[93] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, pp. 47-48.

[94] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 147.

[95] In Merton's writings the Negro is presented as in many ways superior to the white--more perspicacious, more sensitive to social issues, and of generally sounder judgment.

[96] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 170.

[97] Ibid., p. 169.

[98] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 345.

[99] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 170.

[100] Merton, Seeds of Destruction, p. 65.

[101] Merton, ed., Gandhi on Non-Violence (New York, 1965), p. 6 ff.

[102] Ibid., p. 8.

[103] Merton, Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence (Nyack, N. Y., 1967), nonpaginated.

[104] Merton, Gandhi on Non-Violence, Introduction, passim.

CHAPTER IV

POET AND PRIEST

Thus far we have seen that one of the peculiar characteristics of Thomas Merton's social thought, both in its developmental stages and in its mature state, was a vacillation between an emphasis, on the one hand, upon the community and, on the other, upon the individual. That which contributed most to the separate identities of the two stages of Merton's early period was the prevalence of one or the other of these emphases: in the Communist stage Merton was community-oriented in that he saw social problems as solvable principally on a collective scale, through institutional reform; in the conversion stage, though not surrendering a theoretical commitment to collective-type remedies, Merton stressed the point that viable social change, in so far as it was possible at all, had to be posited upon an individual *metanoia*, a complete and permanent change of heart on the part of the members of society. In his mature period, that is, roughly, after 1960, a certain balance was struck between these two world views. Merton's renewed concern for social problems in the concrete caused him to stress once again the need for explicit, extensive, and rapid institutional reform. But he continued to stress with equal earnestness the need for individual conversion. The balance was a precarious one, however, and it often tipped in favor of the latter, usually as a result of Merton's pessimism over the fact that institutional reform, on the scale which he felt was necessary, could actually come about.

The underlying explanation for this vacillation in Merton's social thought between an emphasis upon individual reform and collective reform is that we are dealing with, in effect, two Mertons, Merton the poet and Merton the priest. The two did not always see eye to eye, in fact, they were often plainly antagonistic toward one another.

At certain periods of his life--the stages of his early period--one of the Mertons over-shadowed the other, though at no time was either completely out of the picture. During his mature period a certain modus vivendi was established between the two. The degree to which they got along explained the strength of his mature thought. The degree to which either the poet or the priest gained the ascendancy and became the prominent spokesman--it was most often the poet who did so--explains its inconsistencies.

Merton was a poet in fact and a priest in fact, and both of these facts are important for upon them are founded, respectively, the "two Mertons" to which I refer. But I am concerned here with something broader than simply professional or vocational identification. I am using "poet" and "priest" as metaphors which represent distinctive packages of characteristics--personal, cultural and ideological--and with which I intend to illustrate the two most prominent tendencies in Merton's thought. It shall be my task in this chapter to delineate the contents of these metaphorical packages, to show how, and to what extent, Merton was a poet and a priest, and what bearing these identities had upon his social thought.

It might be helpful, before going into the detailed points of this discussion, to give first some summarizing generalizations about these two metaphors. I mentioned previously that Merton the poet was an advocate of the individual, whereas Merton the priest was a communitarian. This remains the most critical distinction between the two Mertons. But more can be said. Merton the poet was vigorously, sometimes bitterly, antagonistic toward his society. He looked upon modern culture as dangerously corrupt, and was convinced that he, under the aegis of either his art or his religion, must stand apart from that culture, must not identify himself with it at the expense of compromising his own "poetic" integrity. Merton the priest, on the other hand, though having no reason to be happy about his society, felt implicated in it in a manner which would not allow him to set himself apart from it as a superior being standing in judgment. Merton the poet felt an airy independence of society; Merton the priest considered any such independence to be an illusion.

Merton's assuming the role of the poet had most to do with his conscious commitment to a complex of culturally transmitted characteristics which Western society had long associated with that role. But it also had a great deal to do simply with the type of person he was. Merton's disposition was such that it was natural for him to assume the role of one who, fully confident in his own abilities to explore the deepest meanings of life, stood independent and aloof from what was considered a superficial society. He had an innate propensity for unattachment and solitude, and "always tended," as he explained in The Seven Storey Mountain, "to resist any kind of possessive affection on the part of any other human being--there had always been this profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free."[1]

The cultural aspects of the role of the poet which Merton assumed are imbedded deeply within the Romantic tradition. In fact, it was principally the connotation which Romanticism attached to "poet" --understood not simply as a literary designation but as indicating a person with a peculiar way of looking at life and society--which inform my metaphorical usage of the term as applied to Merton. The most significant difference which distinguished the respective world-views of the English 18th century Neo-Classic poets and the Romantics who followed them in the early 19th century was that the former were confident they lived in an intelligently-ordered, well-regulated universe, whereas the latter had no such confidence; for them the universe was organic, unpredictable, and not a little chaotic. Both used the term "nature" liberally, but while the Neo-Classicists indicated thereby a world marvelous for its clock-like precision, the Romanticists' "nature" was a world beautiful for its spontaneous disorganization and flamboyant uncontrol. The Neo-Classicist by and large, felt comfortable and at home in his universe, as well as, on a lesser scale, in his society. An Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson, for example, were not outsiders looking in. In their era the poet and man of letters, had a definite, and respected niche within the structure of society. The Romantics, on the other hand, did not feel that they had been bred into a right relationship with the universe; they felt it was necessary to throw off the incumbrances of a society which had become artificialized and return to the revivifying fountain of spontaneous nature. They often stood against their society in poses of ostentatious defiance, for they believed that society had smothered true, living nature and had replaced it with a bloodless substitute, the concoction of cerebration out of touch with emotion. The Romantics, thus, were rebels against the established order.

The romantic tradition, and the conception of the poet which it fostered, were major influencing factors upon American literature when it was in its formative stages. When American poetry came of age, during the second and third quarters of the 19th century, the first wave of major poets produced by this country were essentially romantics: Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Poe, Thoreau and Whitman. As such, though not uniform in the manner by which they expressed it in their poetry or in their lives, they considered themselves as not fully integrated into the larger community by reason of their special role as poets.

William Cullen Bryant, as a crusading journalist and one of the founders of the Republican party, was hardly a recluse from his society, and yet with his poetry, as Robert E. Spiller correctly points out, "the first separation of literature and American life took place.[2] The romantic idea of the poet as a man apart from his society was thus established in this country.[3] Longfellow, by the retired type life he led and the "romantic unrealities"[4] he dealt with in his poetry was to help establish this idea more securely, and Edgar Allan Poe went even a step further toward the romanticization of the role of the American poet by making of his art a total way of life, a new kind of religion. "In so doing," Spiller remarks, "he seemed alien to his time and his country."[5] There are many traits of Henry David Thoreau which demonstrate how he fits into the American romantic tradition, but for the purposes of this brief summary it suffices to recall the emphasis he placed upon the individual, vis a vis society, in his famous essay, "Civil Disobedience." After plainly showing therein his discontent with American society in general and its government in particular, he declared: "I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society."[6] Walt Whitman, on the other hand, waxed flamboyantly enthusiastic about the "American way," but he seemed to be doing so more in terms of its potential than of its actuality. Thus, toward the end of his life he could lament that never was there in the country "more hollowness at heart than at the present. . . . The underlying principles of the States are not believed in."[7] Furthermore, Whitman, as poet, was always somewhat of an outsider, one who, in his own estimate, had not "gain'd the acceptance of my own time."[8]

Ralph Waldo Emerson, given his wide influence, probably did more than any other man to establish the basis for the romantic conception of the poet in America. The poet, for him, was a very special person, a "seer" who through his quasi-divine abilities probed into and revealed to the masses of men the transcendental realities lying behind the grandiose symbol which was nature. He felt that the poet was a man naturally set apart from society by reason of his unique talents, but he also taught that the poet must consciously preserve his separateness. Emerson admonished the poet:

> Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shall take all from the muse. For the time of towns is tolled from the world by funeral chimes. . . .[9]

Romanticism proper passed on with the 19th century, but one aspect of this literary movement which remained a dominant factor in American letters was the peculiar role it had conceived of for the poet as well as for the artist in general. The poet or novelist in America during the latter part of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century to the present who considered himself to be an integral part of his society was the exception rather than the rule. Almost invariably he was a man set apart, either by the unorthodox or socially uninvolved life he led, or by his devotion to his art, by which he escaped the harsher realities of everyday existence. If he was not ignoring his society, he was often among its most adamant critics.[10] Recently this tradition of separateness from and/or antagonism toward American society on the part of its poets and novelists seems to be weakening, as we see more and more men of letters coupling their criticism with active participation in their society, especially as pertaining to "politics, or opinions of men."[11] Norman Mailer, who has contributed a great deal toward unsettling this tradition, was not too long ago very much a part of it; in 1959 he had argued that "the writer does not need to be integrated into his society, and often works best in opposition to it."[12]

It was this tradition of which Merton, like Mailer, became a modern inheritor. Merton had been academically prepared for the acceptance of the role of the poet as interpreted by this tradition by reason of his special liking for the proto-romantic William Blake. Merton admired Blake primarily for his unworldly attitude, his opposition to a society which he felt had lost its spiritual center.[13] Another important influence upon Merton in confirming him as a poet within the romantic tradition was his teacher at Columbia, Mark Van Doren. Van Doren was among those literary figures in the 1930's who were attempting to turn criticism, especially as applied to poetry, away from an obsession with biographical or sociological considerations in order that it might regard the work of art in its "pure" form. After being delayed by World War Two, this view was to flower forth in the late 1940's and early 1950's in the school called the New Criticism.[14] The New Criticism was, at bottom, a neo-romantic movement in that it effectively emphasized the independence of art--and concomitantly of the artist--from a larger cultural context in which it--he--might be interpreted.[15] Merton adhered to this basic axiom propounded by the New Criticism with fair consistency, although, as witnessed by the rationale which lay behind his anti-poetry, he was not completely subservient to it.

Merton, then, as a poet who conceived of his role according to the criteria established by the romantic tradition was one who tended systematically to remove himself from his society. We have seen the progressive form that removal took in the three steps from graduate school to Catholicism, to the monastery. One interpretation of Merton's decision to live as a hermit during the last few years of his life is that this was the ultimate comment, by Merton the poet, on the nature of his relationship to his society. We also have seen the intensely critical nature of Merton's poetry, whereby he demonstrated himself to be not only apart from society, but also against it. Merton's poetry of both the early and late periods--despite what contrary views he might have favored concerning the autonomy of art[16]--was dynamically interconnected with social realities, and in fact cannot properly be understood unless one views it within the total cultural milieu in which Merton lived and wrote.

If Emerson considered poets to be "seers," they were "dervishes" for Merton, "children of the Unknown . . . ministers of silence that is needed to cure all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy."[17] Emerson warned the poets of his day to keep clear of the world of men. So too, Merton spoke to his fellows about the dangers of being taken in by "them." He admonished young poets to remain

> against all power that poisons man, and subjects him to the mystifications of bureaucracy, commerce and the police state. . . . We must refuse academic classification. We must reject the seductions of publicity. We must not allow ourselves to be pitted against one another in mystical comparisons--political, literary or cultural orthodoxies.[18]

Merton seems to be calling here for a kind of puritanical separatism. The poets--natural elitists by reason of their talent[19]--must band together and wash their hands entirely of all the sordid accoutrements ("academic classification," "mystical comparisons") of a corrupt culture which is seeking to ensnare them and pollute their poetic integrity. The primary danger for the poet, or any artist, from society was that he might lose his freedom under its influence. Society, Merton argued, has predetermined several roles that the poet must play--"hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze." How can any man, he asked, attempt to live up to these dictated roles and still remain free?[20] Merton may not have been willing to accept any of those roles as dictated by society, but, as freely chosen, more than one (hermit, pilgrim, prophet) were considered by him as properly applicable to the poet.

Merton echoed the sentiments of Norman Mailer when he contended that "society benefits when the artist liberates himself from its coercive or seductive pressures."[21] There was a time, he said, the Middle Ages, when the artist was completely integrated in his society. "Today he is hardly likely to find himself unless he is a non-conformist and a rebel."[22] As far as he personally was concerned, Merton was clear about the nature of his relation to society.

> I do not consider myself integrated in the war-making society in which I live. . . . What actually happened is that I have been simply living where I am and developing in my own way without consulting the public about it since it is none of the public's business.[23]

Merton's anti-poetry, the last development of his poetic art, manifests the ambivalence which had crept into his conception of himself as a poet. In its content it was more acid in its anti-society bias than had been any of his previous poetry, but the motivation behind the writing of this poetry was new. Merton looked upon it as a way of involving himself--in a manner suited to his condition--in his society. The poetry was a protest against the evils in that society, a protest made with at least an implicit intention that the poetry would have some small effect toward the eradication of those evils. It was really Merton the priest who had dictated the need for writing anti-poetry.

Merton was ordained a Catholic priest in 1949 about seven years after he had entered Gethsamani. Commenting at the time on the implications this event would have for his life, he wrote that "no man is ordained priest for himself alone . . . my priesthood made me belong not only to God but also to all men."[24] Merton was expressing here the traditional Catholic teaching regarding the role of the priest. Holy Orders, this teaching has it, is one of the social sacraments; it was instituted primarily for the benefit of the whole Church, for mankind at large, and only secondarily for the recipient. The priest, therefore, must live for others rather than for himself, and he must even be willing, in imitation of Christ, to sacrifice his life for others if occasion should demand it. Merton the priest--in the larger, metaphorical sense--was confirmed in that role by his actual ordination, that is to say, an official character, by way of professional commitment, was rendered to certain attitudes and tendencies which had been part of his personality for a long time. As a priest, Merton was deeply concerned about the welfare of mankind as a whole, and was very sensitive to his personal obligations in ameliorating the human condition. As a priest, he was an advocate of social causes, be the motivation secular, as in his Communist stage, or explicitly religious, as was the case in his mature period. As a priest, Merton eschewed exclusivity, either for himself or for a select group, and stressed the common bonds that unite all men.

I have already stated that the two stages of Merton's early period were characterized, indeed identified, by the predominance of the priest and the poet respectively. During his Communist stage Merton was so concerned that his interests in society and its problems not be mitigated by what he considered dangerous influences he decided to cut back on his reading of literature. He underwent, he tells us, a conscious reaction against bourgeoise "artiness."[25] Merton saw many faults within his society at this time; in fact he was convinced that the social structure had to be dismantled and completely revamped. Two factors in his social thinking at this stage were important and distinguished it from that which was to follow. The first was that Merton felt a part of his society, no matter if most of its members did not share his ideology; the second was that Merton believed that the problems of society admitted of solution on a human scale, and in fact they were solvable on no other terms.

During his conversion stage it was Merton the poet who predominated; following the romantic pattern, he now looked upon himself as an alien from his society. But he did not consider this alienation as necessarily bad, for after all, if one's society was morally deficient, to be at odds with it was a badge of honor. Merton stressed those things which distinguished him from society at large--his art, his religion, his monastic vocation--and recommended a moral, if not physical, separation from modern civilization for those who would seek religious perfection. The individual was given special consideration during this stage because Merton was most concerned with contemplation and the problems of personal sanctification. As a Communist he could think of men being converted on a mass scale to the earthly paradise of a classless society; as a young monk he realized that saints were made one by one, and that human society, though improvable, could never produce a paradise.

To think of Merton as embodying within himself two contrasting and often conflicting personae is most helpful when analyzing his mature social thought.

Speaking generally, his mature period is characterized by the fact that Merton the priest once again was to have a prominent voice in his social thought. It was Merton the priest who came to a renewed awareness of his responsibility toward society, in its immediate, existential reality, and began to involve himself in issues such as war and race. The significant thing, however, is that during the mature period neither priest nor poet exerted exclusive domination and both made their presences felt.

There are certain aspects of Merton's mature social thought which clearly reflect the influence of Merton the poet, while there are others which are explained more in terms of Merton the priest. Most important of the characteristics traceable to Merton the poet is his continued emphasis upon the individual. This emphasis was now tempered by the priest's concern for the community at large, but it manifested itself continually in the manner in which Merton refused to admit the viability of any social reform which was not based upon a personal metanoia. Merton's propensity to discuss society in metaphorical terms ("we," "they," "the others), and the related inclination to explain social phenomena as manifestations of larger realities often having profound, if not cosmic, significances (e.g. regarding the Negro revolution as the Kairos of the black man in history, and interpreting the Vietnam war as a "bell tolling for the whole world")[26] is another expression of Merton the poet. The poet, unlike the sociologist or the historian, looks for relationships which transcend the empirical, which connect the here-and-now with the beyond.

It was Merton the poet who called attention to the dangers of activism in the efforts toward bringing about a better society. The poets--or, on a wider scale, the intellectuals--were going to remain effective, he maintained, only insofar as they remained uncontaminated from that which chiefly characterized a culture perverted by a devotion to pragmatism--an obsession with "doing" things which squelches reflection and puts psychic equanimity to flight. Merton's pessimism over the possibility of social reform is also explained by the poet in him, especially in so far as his role was inherited from the romantic tradition. The romantic poet, though hoping that society would change for the better, was often burdened with an ominous premonition that all would end in catastrophe.

Also explainable mainly in terms of Merton's participation in the romantic tradition were his anti-urbanism, his distrust of technology, and his disenchantment with the middle class. The romantic tradition, with its emphasis upon nature as the organic and uncreated, had developed an antipathy for cities as the symbols of the artificial creativity of man. This anti-urban aspect of romanticism, as noted, was until very recently one of the marks of the American intellectual. The American romantic poets, especially Emerson, carefully fostered this anti-urbanism; we recall he reminded poets that "the time of towns is tolled from the world by funeral chimes."[27] Related to Merton's anti-urbanism was the distrust he had for technology, a distrust based on the premise that, though technology was not bad in itself, history had proven it to be bad in effect. Merton agreed with C. S. Lewis that man has reached the point where he has lost control of his own creation, so much so that he now stands in imminent danger of being destroyed by it.[28] Thus, man has been dehumanized by technology; he has lost his true, natural self and has been rendered an impotent, artificial being, an automaton instead of an individual.

Merton's anti-bourgeoise attitude, though naturally prominent in his Communist stage, was mainly an expression of Merton the poet. As poet, he was against the middle class because, through its philistine tastes, it condoned and contributed to a pollution of true art. The middle class, the lives of whose members were wedded to a debilitating materialistic ethic, were insensitive to values which transcended their limited sphere, whether those values be aesthetic or religious. But just as Merton denigrated the middle class for epitomizing all that was worst in modern culture, he placed a special value on the poor people of the world, particularly the American Negroes, as representing the best hope for mankind. In the manner in which he ascribed to the Negro innate qualities which rendered him superior to the white, and by his valuing the Negro precisely for the degree of his non-participation in the mainstream of American culture, Merton was expressing sentiments which had more than passing resemblance to the "noble savage" concept, part of the primitivism complex which had figured prominently in the romantic tradition.

Merton the priest stressed the equality of all men; the foundation for that equality, in his mature period, being the fact that they were all children of God. As a contemplative monk, Merton stressed that equality even more by arguing that mystical union with God was not the exclusive right of a selected few, but was a possibility open to all men. It was Merton the priest who attached to the role of the monk connotations entirely different than those which had guided him as a young Trappist. Then the monk was a non-participant in secular society, one who, like Emerson's poet, had deliberately left behind the "times, customs, graces, politics"[29] of men, in order to devote himself exclusively to the realm of the sacred. The New Merton contended that the monk, even though he might want to, could not escape the world in which he lives; willy-nilly, he is implicated. The point was, however, that he should not want to escape his society, for his duty lay in facing squarely "the world with its suffering, its crises, its confusions and its errors."[30] Even so, the monk's role remained a paradoxical one: he was physically separated from society but he was spiritually, more involved in its anguish than most people living "in the world."

If pessimism was a mark of Merton the poet, optimism was that of Merton the priest. This optimism, however, was of a very special kind; it was an eschatological optimism, founded upon the theological virtue of hope. It did not mean, therefore, that Merton harbored a naive anticipation that "everything was going to be all right," at least not in the short run. His apocalyptic vision was only superficially pessimistic. For through it he believed that, even though modern civilization arrive at the logical terminus of its nihilistic tendencies, bringing an end to the human race, there would be a happy resolution to the drama, on the other side of history, in eternity.

One particular aspect of his new openness to society which revealed the influence of Merton the priest was the manner in which he modified his harsh opinion of politics. From a position where he regarded politics as the exclusive domain of sinister men bent upon the cynical manipulation of the masses, he came so far as to suggest that "political action itself is a kind of spiritual action, an expression of spiritual responsibility, and a witness to Christ."[31] For this rather dramatic alteration of attitudes Merton, as we have seen, owed a great deal to Gandhi.

Stating the case thus--putting the manifestations of Merton the poet on one side of the ledger and those of Merton the priest on the other--it all seems rather neat. In fact, it is a bit too neat. Doing so helps us to distinguish the two conflicting clusters of tendencies working within Merton, and this is important, but it oversimplifies a complex situation in so far as it suggests that, once either the poet or the priest had taken a position on a given issue, that position remained stable. In fact such was not the case, and it was the constant interaction between priest and poet on several issues which explain in great part the inconsistencies and the constant shifting in emphasis to be found in Merton's mature social thought.

If in his mature social thought Merton emphasized the primacy of the individual, he also warned against the dangers of individualism, especially as it has been developed within American culture. Too, the metaphor was a convenient means for him to describe the larger forces which he saw to be at work within contemporary society, and he employed it liberally, but he was also aware that a humbler attitude demanded refraining from stereotyping large groups and using this as a "fulcrum for our own supposed righteousness to exert itself upon the world."[32] Merton was pessimistic, but he admitted that he had not "sufficient evidence for a really strong opinion in favor of my own pessimism and therefore perhaps it is better not to cultivate it."[33] He was cognizant of the dangers of over activity, and yet he was convinced that unless men of good will act the world is doomed.

Merton could advocate a greater participation in society on the part of monks, and yet claim that the monk "is actually of no interest to anyone except in so far as he is really a monk,"[34] and suggest that the direction monastic reform must take is toward a life of greater seclusion based upon the revivification of the eremitical tradition.[35] Merton, in his personal life, was continually vacillating between involvement in social affairs, through his writing, and concentrating upon living a hermit's life built around study and meditation. More than once he announced that he would "avoid writing about current crises"[36] (1966), and "would no longer comment on current events"[37] (1968), only to return to the fray once again. The poet proposed, the priest disposed. And, if we detect a softening in his attitude toward politics, the old animosity was not completely forgotten, and in the same year (1966) in which he declared politics to be a form of "witness to Christ," he also spoke about the "politicians" with all the pejorative connotations he once habitually attached to that term.[38]

I have employed these two metaphors, the poet and the priest, primarily to illustrate and explain the opposite tending characteristics of Merton's social thought. To the degree that they underly the confusions and inconsistencies of that thought the two Mertons lend themselves to a generally negative evaluation. But that is only half the story. Merton the poet and Merton the priest represent the creative tension established within a man who lived the intellectual life to the hilt. Merton never lost enthusiasm for inquiry, and he was never satisfied with facile answers, least of all his own. His intellectual honesty was such that he did not allow himself to become saddled with one point of view for fear that it would prohibit his freedom from examining others. The poet and the priest represent the two poles of a dialogue which Merton perpetually carried on within himself as an assurance that he would never go stale in the search for truth. Merton--for all the forthrightedness of some of his own opinions--displayed an openness to the opinions of others which it would be difficult to find matched by any other contemporary thinker. In the end, the two Mertons, continually questioning the validity of each other's positions, kept him alive and receptive to new ideas, and provided an immeasurable richness to his thought.

Of the several ways he could accurately have been identified, Merton said that he preferred to be known simply as a poet. Because Merton valued so highly his role as a poet, and because his poetry has figured significantly in this study, it is appropriate that some consideration be given to an evaluation of his work.

Merton began seriously to write poetry while he was a student at Columbia, and it was apparent from the start that his talent for this art form was genuine. In 1939 he won the Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer Annual Poetry Prize for his poem, "Fable for a War," which was subsequently printed in the New York Times.[39] Merton claimed the prize was undeserved, but describing the type of verse he was then writing, he said that he had "acquired a sudden facility for rough, raw Skeltonic verses."[40] His poetry at this time was also inspired, he says, by the work of the 17th century lyricist, Andrew Marvell.[41] About a year later, in the spring of 1940, Merton made a trip to Cuba and there wrote "Song for Our Lady of Cobre," which he called "the first real poem I had ever written . . . it opened the gate, and set me travelling on a certain and direct track that was to last me several years."[42]

As we have already seen, after he had entered the monastery Merton was determined to give up poetry, believing that it was incompatible with his monastic vocation and would prove an obstacle to his spiritual development. Once he had been dissuaded from this intention by Dom Frederic Dunne, however, Merton indulged in a burst of poetic production. His first four volumes of poetry appeared in the five year period between 1944 and 1949. Robert Lowell, reviewing Thirty Poems, Merton's first book, considered the author to be "possibly, the most consequential Catholic poet to write in English since the death of Francis Thompson."[43] With a recommendation like that, by someone like Lowell, Merton was obviously off to a good start. A reviewer of Merton's second volume of poetry, A Man in the Divided Sea, after identifying it as "brilliant, provocative . . . seductive . . . without doubt, one of the important books of the year" [1946], stated that he did not think that Merton had done his most important work as yet and expressed the hope that "nothing interferes with his poetic development."[44] I mention this because, in my opinion, something did interfere with Merton's poetic development, and after a rather auspicious beginning as evidenced by his first four books, there was, in his final three volumes,[45] a noticeable decrease in the quality of his poetry. Merton's later poetry, in general, lacked the verve and spontaneity, the almost naive earnestness which had characterized, and enriched, his earlier. His later poetry had a staid, mechanical quality, as if "writing poetry" had become for Merton a professional task rather than the spontaneous expression he said it should be. Very often what we find in his later poetry is simply prose cast in the form of verse.

If forced to point to a single factor which indicated the change which had come about in Merton's poetry, I would say that it was his moving away from a dependence upon the concrete image--essential to poetry-- and his growing inclination to deal more in verbal abstractions, which are more proper to the province of prose. All good poetry, I believe, has a "message" to convey; it teaches. But what distinguishes it as poetry, and simultaneously protects it from the pejorative designation of the term "didactic," is that, unlike prose, it teaches by indirection. It puts forth images which represent the message the poet is attempting to convey, and it is up to the reader to wring from those images the proper messages and perhaps--and this is the wonder of poetry, as well as of all art--a good deal more besides, which the poet did not consciously intend, but which does not for that matter go counter to the basic intent of the images he employs.[46]

Let us look at some specific instances of this change in Merton's poetry. In one of his early poems

"Figures for an Apocalypse," which I consider to be among his best, Merton had several "messages" which he was attempting to convey. They have to do with his whole attitude toward contemporary society, which we have already examined. They can be summed up thus: Merton thought that modern culture, corrupted by materialism, participated in by automatons rather than men, and symbolized chiefly by the ugly, techno-oriented, thus de-humanizing, city, was heading for a monumental fall, an apocalypse. Merton said all this, and more, in the poem, but by means of images. We observe as

> A blue-green medium dragon, swimming in the
> river,
>
> Emerges from the muddy waters, comes to romp
> awhile upon the land.[47]

What is this dragon? It is an image for the corruption which Merton saw in modern culture, a corruption which to many people was not apparent, lying beneath the placid waters of what they preferred to call "progress." But now, at the time of reckoning, this corruption bursts forth in all its hideousness and romps about for all to see. This is a vivid, this is a poetic way to state one's thoughts. "There are no problems in the apocalypse," Merton wrote to a friend almost twenty years after he had written this poem, "only monsters."[48] Though not intending to do so, he was here stating, in essence, the case for poetry. Poetry does not deal with "problems," that is, it does not attempt analytically to examine the terms of the themes with which it is concerned. What it does do, and what Merton did very effectively in "Figures for an Apocalypse," is release the "monsters"--or whatever images are appropriate to its theme--and let these carry the burden of the poem.

The Strange Islands, which was published in 1957, is a kind of hinge book in that it marks the turning point in the general quality of Merton's poetry. It was no accident that the critics leaned heavily on this book, and though they were at times unfairly harsh, by and large they accurately detected therein the change for the worse that had taken place in his poetry.[49] Donald Hall thought that the book was "shoddy, second-hand, and forced . . . a decline from his earlier work."[50] He detected in Merton's poetry a "technical insincerity," by which he meant a "poetry deficient in artistry . . . we hear a man saying what he believes he believes, but we hear him speaking poetry very badly."[51] What Hall is saying here, translated into the terms I have been using, is that Merton had ceased to speak primarily through concrete images, the language of poetry, and was dealing too much in abstract ideas.

A passage from this book, from the long verse drama, "The Tower of Babel," demonstrates the extent to which Merton had moved away from the use of imagery.

> No. They only appear
> To know what they are building.
> They think it is a tower
> That will reach heaven.
> They think they speak the same
> Language, that they are of one
> Mind.
>   Presently
> We shall discover that they are
> Only of one voice. Many minds,
> Many thoughts signifying nothing.[52]

The most important thing to notice about this passage--and this applies, with exceptions here and there, to the poem as a whole--is that it is essentially prose. There is not a single productive image here. Merton, acting as a philosopher rather than a poet, is in the process of delineating intellectual abstractions. He does not propose images, and then leave the abstracting to the readers, but attempts to spell out explicitly the "problem" as he sees it. Again, this is not poetry, but that it is perfectly good prose might be demonstrated by recasting the passage and putting it in what might be considered its proper form.

> No. They only appear to know what they are building. They think it is a tower that will reach to heaven. They think they speak the same language, that they are of one mind. Presently we shall

> discover that they are only of one voice.
> Many minds, many thoughts signifying
> nothing.

Granted, thus presented, one might be inclined to identify this passage as "poetic prose," and with good cause, but it remains basically prose none the less.

The ironical thing about the transition in Merton's poetry from an emphasis on concrete images to abstractions is that the general direction of his thought was tending in precisely the opposite direction. Merton came to regard one of the main aberrations of modern thinking as a disinclination to deal with concrete entities, especially when those entities were human beings, and to deal instead with intellectual abstractions. He traced this aberration to Descartes who, Merton claimed, had inaugurated the revolution in thought which had led to putting the idea of a human being above the concrete reality of a living person.[55] This type of thinking had its sordid uses, for if one could think of other persons as abstractions rather than concrete existents, then when one discussed such things as nuclear war, for example, it was possible to treat of "mega-deaths" and "mega-corpses" without having to face the real horror of what one was talking about. The "nuclear realists," Merton held, were perfect examples of men who had come to live completely by abstractions rather than concrete realities.

Having identified what I consider to be the root cause, within the work itself, of the diminution in quality of Merton's later poetry, the question remains, how did this shift in emphasis from image to abstraction come about? The explanation lay mainly in the simple fact that Merton had so many other concerns and obligations besides poetry that he did not have the requisite time to devote to his art, and as a result his skill in the manipulation of images diminished. Leisure is an essential condition for the writing of poetry, in the sense that one must have the time which is most often necessary to allow a poem to ripen. Robert Frost sometimes kept a poem for years, continually re-working it, before he considered it right for publication, and Yeats spoke of that "click" he experienced--often after a long wait--which told him that a poem was in its finished form. Donald Hall, in his negative review of The Strange Islands, perhaps unaware of the extent of Merton's other concerns, concluded that Merton seemed "to regard poetry as an emotional outlet rather than an art."[54] Nothing, in fact, could have been further from the truth, for by this time Merton had a higher regard than ever before for poetry as art. The fact was that he did not have the time to treat it as art.

When we come to consider Merton's anti-poetry, which was fully represented by the last volume of poetry published before his death, Cables to the Ace,[55] we are faced with a special problem, for here Merton was, in a certain sense, abdicating from poetry, and therefore it would seem that one would be obliged to bring to bear an entirely different set of criteria for judging this book. Well, yes and no. If a man claims that he is no longer writing conventional poetry, then it is obviously unfair to him to judge his works by the standards of conventional poetry. The other side of the coin, as far as Merton's case is concerned, is that, as indicated by the very name of the form, he was still operating within the general poetic genre, and for this reason the essential elements of that genre still form the basis for criticism of his work.

Merton's anti-poetry did not reverse the general downward trend in the quality of his work. Although there are some instances in Cables for the Ace where poor quality is explained by his dealing with prose abstractions instead of poetic images, for the most part what we find in this book is not a lack of images but, alas, a surfeit of images. The result is not poetic illumination but opacity. I have said that the poet speaks primarily by indirection, and that he does so through the use of imagery. An image, to be decipherable--as it must be if it is to be a true image--must be placed in a larger context, the poem itself, in which it is balanced with other symbols in such a manner that what they represent can go together to form a meaningful poetic "statement."[56] The poem does not make this statement, to repeat. It suggests it through its images; it is the reader who abstracts the statement from the images. If images are not properly ordered, however, or if there is an overabundance of them, one is incapable of deriving from them any kind of poetic statement. The images lose their transparency and become obstacles rather than aids to vision.

What we find in Cables to the Ace is Merton the essayist at work rather than Merton the poet. He has at his disposal a good many, indeed a plethora, of poignant symbols, but rather than weaving them together in a disciplined poetic statement, he throws them indiscrimently at the reader and, in effect, asks him to perform what is in reality his proper task as the poet. One might attempt to use a "Prologue" to distract the reader from what he, in his more reflective moments, knows to be his, and the poet's proper tasks--as Merton seems to have tried to do here--but there is no substitute for the hard work of making poetry, not even the announcement that it is anti-poetry.

Though I have concerned myself here with describing what I take to be a general tailing-off of the quality of Merton's poetry, I wish to underline that I am speaking of general trends. There are, to be sure, specific poems in his later works--for example, "Original Sin" in Cables to the Ace--which are up to par with some of the finest he wrote earlier. This matter is also important, however, for the way it ties into the central concern of this study. The diminishing quality of Merton's poetry, as I pointed out, was connected with the multiplicity of his other concerns; these concerns, in turn, were connected with the revivification of his interest in social problems. As to the matter of his anti-poetry, his decision to begin writing in this form had much to do with his conclusion that poetry could, and should, be used as a means of social protest. This conclusion is certainly not invalid, but when one becomes so intent upon the effect (social protest) that one neglects the quality of the cause (poetry)--which is partially what happened with Merton--then the danger is that one ends by not writing poetry at all.

On the basis of Merton's entire poetic production, I feel that he deserves to be rated as one of the principal minor poets of 20th century American literature. First of all, I wish to make perfectly clear that I intend nothing derogatory by the term "minor poet," while at the same time admitting that I have for it no pat definition. At any rate, it is easier to describe a minor poet than define one. In Shakespeare's day, Ben Jonson was a major poet and Sir Walter Raleigh was a minor poet. In 19th century America Emily Dickinson was a major poet and Sidney Lanier was a minor poet. In Merton's own day, he was a minor poet in relation to contemporaries like, say, Robert Lowell and John Berryman. Merton, in some of his poems, equalled the quality of the works produced by these men but the difference lay in the fact that the quality of his work did not display the high-levelled consistency of theirs. Consistent high-quality, then, if one wishes to venture toward definitions, is one of the marks of the major poet as opposed to the minor.

Though it must remain an exercise in pure conjecture, the question suggests itself: Could Merton have become, if some of the circumstances of his life had been different, a major poet? Would it have made a difference, for example, if he had not been beset by so many distracting side-concerns, and could have devoted more time and attention to his poetic development? I am inclined toward answering such questions in the affirmative. Merton gives sufficient indications, especially in his early poetry, that he was of the stuff of which major poets are made. The sustained quality of "Figures for an Apocalypse" is an important clue, and the "creditable fragments"[57] to which one critic referred, and which one finds throughout Merton's poetic corpus, provide weighty support for the contention that he had in him the potential for poetic greatness.

NOTES

[1] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York, 1948), p. 57.

[2] Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (Mentor ed., New York, 1957), p. 39.

[3] I agree with Spiller's contention that Bryant "led American poetry out of the stiff restraints of the Augustan mode into a simplicity and delight which accurately reflected the new frontiers of mind and spirit." Ibid., p. 37.

[4] Ibid., p. 101.

[5] Ibid., p. 62.

[6] Brooks Atkinson, ed., Walden: And Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau (New York, 1950), p. 651.

[7] Harold W. Blodgett, ed., The Best of Whitman (New York, 1953), p. 319.

[8] Ibid., p. 430.

[9] R. W. Emerson, Essays, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1890), p. 47. This is quoted from the essay entitled, "The Poet."

[10] Two works among many which discuss this pattern are, Morton and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City (Cambridge, 1962), and Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature.

[11] Emerson, Essays, p. 47.

[12] Norman Mailer, Advertisements For Myself (New York, 1959), p. 188. Mailer goes on to say: "It is worth something to remind ourselves that the great artists--certainly the moderns--are always in opposition to their society, and that integration, acceptance, non-alienation, etc., etc., have been more conducive to propaganda than art." Ibid., p. 190.

[13] Merton, _The Seven Storey Mountain_, p. 87.

[14] Spiller, _The Cycle of American Literature_, p. 208 ff.

[15] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, two of the more prominent members of the New Criticism school, emphasize that the intrinsic value of a poem does not exist in isolation from other values, but: "What the relation is between this instrinsic value and other values is a most vexed and delicate question, one that cannot be settled here. Perhaps it can never be settled." _Understanding Poetry_ (New York, 1950), p. xxiv.

[16] This is one of Merton's inconsistencies. Though, at least implicitly, he attached a functional value to art, he could also maintain that the artist (the poet in particular) was not a "persuader" but one who pursued his art in virtual isolation from society. See _Raids on the Unspeakable_ (New York, 1966), p. 155 ff.

[17] _Ibid_., p. 160.

[18] _Ibid_., p. 158.

[19] Merton argued for the peculiarity, indeed superiority, of poets while at the same time claiming they were but "ordinary men." See _Ibid_., p. 155 ff.

[20] _Ibid_., p. 173.

[21] _Ibid_., p. 172.

[22] _Ibid_., p. 173.

[23] _Ibid_., p. 172.

[24] Merton, _The Sign of Jonas_ (New York, 1953), p. 181.

[25] Merton, _The Seven Storey Mountain_, p. 138.

[26] Merton, Preface to the Vietnamese edition of No Man is an Island (1966), English version, unpublished.

[27] Emerson, Essays, p. 47.

[28] C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man (New York, 1947).

[29] Emerson, Essays, p. 47.

[30] Merton, Seeds of Destruction (New York, 1964), p. xiii.

[31] Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York, 1966), p. 69.

[32] Merton, Faith and Violence (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 146.

[33] Merton, Letter to C. H., Ontario, unpublished.

[34] Merton, Redeeming the Time (London, 1966), p. 112.

[35] Merton, Letter to the Editor, National Catholic Reporter, 4: 11 (January 11, 1968), p. 11. This is but one of several places where Merton addresses himself to this subject.

[36] Jim Morrissey, "Monk, Man and Myth: Talks With and About Thomas Merton," Louisville Courier-Journal Magazine (January 23, 1966), p. 15.

[37] Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 145.

[38] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 159.

[39] Will Lissner, "Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet," Catholic World (February, 1948), pp. 424-32.

[40] Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 235.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 283.

[43] Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," *Commonweal*, vol. 42 (June 22, 1945), p. 240.

[44] John Nerber, "A Trappist Canticle," *Poetry*, vol. 69 (December 1946), p. 188.

[45] *Strange Islands*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, and *Cables to the Ace*. Because it cannot be unambiguously classified as poetry, I omit *Original Child Bomb* from this discussion.

[46] T. S. Eliot expressed this idea in a poetry reading given at the Chicago Opera House in the fall of 1959.

[47] Merton, *Figures For an Apocalypse* (New York, 1947), p. 26.

[48] Merton, Letter to H. M., Pacific Palisades, unpublished.

[49] See: Donald Hall, "Sincerity and the Muse," *Saturday Review*, vol. 40 (July 6, 1957), pp. 29-30; Donald Justice, "Sacred and Secular," *Poetry*, vol. 91 (October 1957), pp. 41-44; John Logan, "Babel Theory," *Commonweal*, vol. 66 (July 5, 1967), pp. 357-58.

[50] Hall, *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[52] Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York, 1957), pp. 47-48.

[53] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 241 ff, p. 260.

[54] Donald Hall, "Sincerity and the Muse," p. 30.

[55] The author has been informed by Mr. James Laughlin of New Directions that his company will publish in October, 1969 a long poem of Merton's entitled "Geography of Lograire."

[56] The "statement" or "message" of a poem need not necessarily be able to be expressed in discursive terms. It may be, in the case, for example, of Imagist poetry, an untranslatable symbol. That is to say, the meaning of a poem need not be able to be stated in terms of prose, although there is no reason why, in some cases, this cannot be done. The point to be made is that the "message," "statement" or "meaning" of a poem are essentially poetic. The fact that the meaning of a poem cannot at times effectively be rendered in prose (i.e., in discursive terms) has led some to conclude, erroneously, that a poem does not "mean," it simply "is," implying that meaning is restricted to prose. As for Archibald MacLeish's famous dictum to this effect, I would suggest that he is proposing an impossibility, for there can be no being without meaning, poetic being not excluded.

[57] Carol Johnson, "The Vision and the Poem," Poetry, 96 (September 1960), p. 388.

CHAPTER V

SOLITUDE AND COMMUNITY

Thomas Merton was particularly fond of paradox, primarily because he considered there was an unusual amount of it in his own life. From the point of view of this study, there was certainly paradox in the fact that he, secluded from the mainstream of American society, was both very knowledgeable about society and deeply involved with its problems. The essence of paradox is that the contradiction it contains is more apparent than real, and Merton firmly believed that there was nothing innately incompatible between a simultaneous commitment to solitude and a commitment to community; in fact, the former deepened and strengthened the latter. Monastic life, in other words--as he never grew tired of repeating, especially in his later years--is not simply a negativistic turning away from the world but rather a means whereby a man binds himself even more closely, albeit on a mystical level alone perhaps, to that world and its problems.

None the less, Merton was well aware that monasticism for most Americans, Catholics not excluded, made little, if any, sense. This was in great part explained for him by the unfavorable moral climate produced by the society, for "in a materialistic culture which is fundamentally irreligious the monk is incomprehensible because he "produces nothing."[1] But if the monk was a paradox to others because he did not seem to fit into the modern world, he was also, for different reasons, often a paradox to himself. This was because his vocation was surrounded in mystery, and that, if he were loyal to it, he was "constantly rediscovering what it means to be a monk."[2] "The monk," Merton wrote, "who has ceased to ask himself 'Why have you come here?' has perhaps ceased to be a monk."[3] It is clear that he never ceased to ask that question of himself; he was constantly reexamining the meaning of his monastic vocation, especially its social implications.

When we look for the reasons behind Merton's initial decision to become a monk primary importance must be given to the fact that--as with earlier decisions to become first a Communist and later a Catholic--it was simply the end result of an intelligent man's reasoned conviction that this was the proper thing/for him to do. I spell out this rather obvious conclusion because there is a tendency of late--what with the emphasis given to the sociological factors behind human actions--to overlook the fundamental fact of free will, with the thought processes which normally precede its exercise, and the crucial role these play in determining what decisions an individual makes.

Having thus given due recognition to the importance of what can be called the subjective factors behind Merton's decision, and before I examine in detail his philosophy of solitude which was the core of his monastic life, I would like to put his decision into its proper sociological and/or cultural contexts. For, just as sociological factors do not explain everything, neither do the purely subjective. In any man's life there is a constant interplay between the internal and the external, between the thrust of free will and the pressure of sociological exigencies.

The special sociological significance of Merton's choice of a monastic way of life is that by it, as was true of so many other things in his life, he demonstrated how closely linked he was to American culture. In this case he was incorporating himself into the tradition of communitarianism, a tradition which began and was at its healthiest in the 19th century but which is still very much alive today, especially in the form of Roman Catholic monasticism. This communitarianism, as Mulford Q. Sibley points out, "seeks to achieve community through varying degrees of withdrawal from the mainstream of society and to solve the perennial problems of culture on a small scale."[4] Among several examples of communitarianism in the 19th century one might note the Brook Farm venture, with which Nathaniel Hawthorne was for a time associated, the Oneida community under the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes, and the experiment in Fourierism at Red Bank, New Jersey, the North American Phalanx, which numbered among its supporters W. H. Channing and Horace Greeley. Today the communitarian tradition survives in an especially vibrant form in the Hutterian communities found in the northern United States and Canada.[5] Also, though lacking the clear intent and formidable organization which characterized most of the above communities, the recent Hippie phenomenon in the United States, at least in some of its manifestations, demonstrated an affinity to the communitarian tradition.

The various communities, past and present, that exemplify this tradition have many differences among them. A glance at one area--that of sexual mores--clearly demonstrates this.

The Oneida community practised a kind of sexual communism, wherein the "adult members should be husbands or wives to all members of the opposite sex."[6] The Shakers, guided by the strong eschatological bent of their theology, advocated celibacy. The present day Hutterites build their community around the conventional family structure, encouraging large families and strongly discouraging divorce. The common denominator for all, however, is that each community, no matter how different their views in this or in other areas, removed itself from the larger society and endeavored, on a small scale, to mold the perfect community; and it is this common denominator which is shared by Roman Catholic monasticism and makes it a part of the tradition.

After an abortive start early in the century, monasticism established itself permanently in this country during the 1840's, struggled through a good many lean years in the late 1800's and, in the 20th century, blossomed into a dynamic institution which is the pride of the Universal Church. The two orders which set the pace in the revival of monasticism which Merton--no mean student of monastic history--thought equalled in many ways the great European revivals of the 11th and 12th centuries, were the Benedictines and, Merton's own order, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists). The two most famous abbeys of these orders, St. John's of Minnesota and Gethsemani of Kentucky, were founded within ten years of one another (St. John's, 1858;

Gethsemani, 1848) and are today the largest monasteries of their respective orders in the world. Over 350 monks are attached to St. John's, and Gethsemani, after making several new foundations throughout the country, is now down to a manageable 150 monks. In 1952 the abbey housed 275. As noted earlier, there are today twelve Trappist monasteries in the United States; the Benedictines, featuring a distinctly milder form of life, attract considerably more applicants and currently boast of no less than thirty-six monasteries. With the recent foundations of Carthusian and Camaldolese monasteries, the United States now provides a home for every major monastic order in the Catholic Church.

One of the results of Merton's constant re-evaluation of his monastic vocation was his moving away from the strong negative connotations he had attached to it as a young Trappist. Then, the monastic life was primarily a "rejection of the world," and for him personally it represented a repudiation of an American society which he had determined was rotten to the core and, indeed, in the last stages before its complete collapse. To be sure, this negative element of monasticism always retained a valid importance for him, and toward the end of his life he continued to claim that monastic life was "fundamentally a life of protest and iconoclasm."[7] But the point is that--~~as was~~ generally the case in his mature period--he began to think less in terms of extremes, and in the process began to bring out the communitarian implications of monasticism. The monk's main duty remained to seek God, but this search was seen within the context of not only the monastic community but of mankind at large. The whole import of Merton's book, *No Man Is an Island* was that the search for perfection is not--cannot be--carried on in isolation, for the love of God is inextricably bound up with the love of men.

Merton insisted, however, that though the monk contributes toward establishing a greater sense of community in the world, he does so precisely insofar as he is loyal to his vocation as a monk. This means that he carefully preserves his essential separateness from society in order that he can freely cultivate the most important aspect of monasticism, solitude.

The paradox of a man who claims an undying love for mankind and yet lives secluded from the mainstream of society will prove a scandal to many, yet the monk must not be intimidated by public opinion into being disloyal to his vocation. He realizes that his separateness is not intended as a badge of moral superiority. He knows that though he has left most of the physical accoutrements of his culture behind he has taken with him into the monastery the mental agonies of that culture, for they are buried deep within his psyche, and with these he will wrestle the remainder of his days for the good of all mankind. The monk, therefore, must not waste time "trying to convince others or even himself that he amounts to anything very special."[8] He must simply live as a monk, seeing "himself and all men together in the light of great and solemn facts which no one can evade."[9]

Solitude, for Merton, was not only essential to monasticism, it was essential to life. With Thoreau, he agreed that there is in every human being a certain incommunicable element and "no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another."[10] As have many artists, Merton posited this innate human solitude upon the fact that each man must die alone. This, however, was symbolic of a yet more pervasive truth.

> Each man will have to die, and die alone, at the same time (but this is what they do not want to see) each one must also live alone. For we must remember that the Church is at the same time community and solitude.[11]

There was, therefore, a certain unavoidable quality to solitude; it was a "given" of the human condition. On a different level, however, man could, and indeed must if it were to prove efficacious for him, choose solitude. In other words, he must realistically accept his condition for what it is and not try to entertain the illusion that he is not, on an elemental, unavoidable basis, alone. Merton demonstrated the manner in which he was influenced by existentialist thought by his contention that the first step in a man's choosing his own solitude is the recognition of his absurdity. Unlike what this might have meant for non-theistic existentialists, this recognition of one's absurdity was not the teeth-gritting acceptance of a meaningless universe, the determination to roll one's stone to the top of the hill with Sisyphean persistence even though one knew that, once at the top, the stone would come tumbling down and the tedious process would have to be repeated again and again *ad infinitum*. The universe, for Merton, was not meaningless, and therefore a man's absurdity was provisional; it was *his* absurdity not that of the universe, the result of his sins (the wrong decisions he made) and not simply "the way things are." To recognize one's absurdity was to recognize one's limitations, to realize that in any given situation one's answers, hitherto sufficient perhaps for every occasion, were now either meaningless or simply irrelevant. To recognize one's absurdity was, in the end, an act of faith in a reality which transcended one's own limitations, the humble recognition that the meaning of the universe rested in that reality and in the long run both the meaning and the reality would be revealed to man.

But if the free acceptance of solitude was essential it was also dangerous, for though man should seek solitude in order to escape illusion, solitude of itself was no assurance against illusion. Whereas the flight from solitude into the distractions of mass society provides an escape from the hard task of facing up to one's limitations, solitude could provide the occasion for a subjective kind of escape. It could be the means by which a person lulls himself to sleep by entertaining "a private myth which is only a sterile dream."[12] Answering the call to choose one's solitude, therefore, was not a

> vocation to the warm narcississtic dream of a private religion. It is a vocation to become fully awake, even more than the common somnolence permits one to be, with its arbitrary selection of approved dreams.[13]

Merton felt that the cult of individualism which had long been part of American culture expressed on a large scale the cases of people who were, in their solitude, entertaining "narcississtic dreams" about themselves. In his own emphasis upon the individual he took pains to make clear his dislike of individualism.

He began with the premise that "the moral evil in the world is due to man's alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of spiritual life within himself, to his alienation from God."[14] An *individual* was non-alienated; he was one who had discovered his "true self," that is, the existential foundation of his person, where his being made contact with Transcendant Being. In discovering his "true self," therefore, the individual discovered God, the Father of mankind, and thereby solidified his communion with all men. An *individualist*, on the other hand, had discovered his "empirical self," which had nothing to do with existential reality; it was a cognitive fabrication, a fiction of the mind. Rather than this discovery leading him to God and intensifying his sense of community, it merely led him to become enamored with a false self and thus become isolated from other men. The individualist, therefore, was suffering under a triple alienation, from God, from his true self, and from others.

Merton looked upon solitude, then, and the opportunity for the discovery of one's true self which it provided, as having very important social implications. Solitude was necessary for community because a man must first know himself before he could begin to know and peacefully to live with others.

The solitude with which Merton was particularly concerned was internal solitude, as distinct from physical solitude. The former was normally dependent upon the latter but not necessarily so. It was possible, he maintained, to become a contemplative in New York City as well as in a secluded rural monastery--possible, but much more difficult. Physical solitude provided the best conditions for the attainment of the more essential internal solitude, and monasticism, as far as he personally was concerned, provided the best conditions for physical solitude. Though Merton attached this and other important values to monasticism, however, he did not from first to last display the same kind of regard nor degree of enthusiasm for the institution.

He claimed that his initial attraction for monasticism had not a little to do with certain medieval values which it had retained, and, he wrote, "it would be utterly dishonest for me to claim that when I first came to Gethsemani the place was not for me a 'sign of Christ'."[15] As the years passed, perhaps as a result of the censorship problems he ran into with his superiors, perhaps because he felt that the call for renewal put out by Vatican II was proceeding too slowly with regard to monasticism, Merton became more critical of his way of life.

Writing to a friend in the early 1960's about the censorship problem, he explained that one of the reasons given him for the restrictions placed upon his writing on nuclear war and the arms race was that he might through his political involvement bring the monastic life into disrepute. "Man," he wrote, "I would think that it might just possibly salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet."[16] In 1968, in another letter, he wrote: "Admittedly I would hesitate to write a book extolling the monastic vocation today, and would be very slow to urge anyone else to enter it as it now is."[17] Whether or not Merton himself ever thought of leaving the monastic life, remains, thanks to his characteristic inconsistency, problematic. Within a few months of one another he could make, first, the statement that he "never for a moment thought of changing the definitive decisions of my life: to be a Christian, to be a monk, to be a priest,"[18] and then the counter-statement that "I have never seriously considered leaving the Church . . . though the question of leaving the monastic state has presented itself."[19] What is clear is that Merton, toward the end of his life was not as happy with monasticism as he once had been, but in the final analysis his was a lover's quarrel with a way of life to which for all its deficiencies he was deeply and irrevocably committed. It is significant that on several different occasions when he listed for friends the things he had most to be grateful for--and this goes up to the last year of his life--his monastic vocation was inevitably given prominent mention.

Merton, as mentioned, understood that his monastic way of life was going to be a scandal to the majority of America's mass society, but this did not bother him as much as the fact that some of his friends, especially those who were active with him in the anti-war and the civil rights movements, were either baffled or offended by his seclusion. He informed his close friend Dorothy Day that one worker in the peace movement had written him a long letter in which he argued that Merton's "whole monastic life was a pure evasion, that [he] ought to be back in the world leading a life of authentic involvement like himself, etc."[20] Merton assured Dorothy Day that he remained unimpressed by that type of argument and was "more determined than ever on my present course, in spite of what they may think about it."[21]

An important reason for Merton's loyalty to the physical solitude of his monasticism was that, despite the critical need he saw for involvement in social issues, he did believe there was such a thing as over-involvement. He had a built in defense--it was the poet in him--against reaching that point (where action becomes activism) when one's activities begin to defeat the very purposes for which one is striving. Once one had acted, it was better simply to let the action take root rather than to follow upon it with further, less well-considered actions. As for himself and his writing, he claimed that

> While silence can constitute guilt and complicity, once one has taken a stand he is not necessarily obliged to come out with a new answer and to a new solution to insoluble problems every third day.[22]

He said that he mistrusted an "obsession with declarations and pronouncements;"[23] he also mistrusted organizations or movements, even though they were ordered toward the most noble of ends, for he thought that they had a tendency to lose whatever charisma they might have had initially and degenerate into the very things they were attempting to combat. Thus, "the trouble with movements," for him, "is that they sweep you off your feet and carry you away with the tide of activism and then you become another kind of mass man."[24] This was the poet speaking,the man who was innately discomforted by social entanglements of any kind.

Merton's personal involvement in social problems seemed to convince him that one works best for peace or racial justice by living as fully and perfectly as possible one's own life and not by trying to be something one is not. For him, this meant that he should concentrate fully on monasticism. This explains, in the last few years of his life, the various announcements he made to the effect that he would write no more on social issues. It explains also his renewed interest in Oriental mysticism and monasticism. By the final year of his life, although there was still vacillation, he seemed more and more convinced that his peculiar vocation was to withdraw into a life of complete solitude. He wrote to Dorothy Day that it was clear to him "that if I pretended to keep up with politics here and tried to utter profound judgments from my solitude I would be deceiving myself and perhaps others. . . . My solitude has to be completely genuine, otherwise what use is it?"[25]

The extended trip which he took to the Far East in the fall of 1968 was in some respects a confirmation of his determination to disengage himself from public affairs and to devote himself exclusively to pursuits which he felt were more proper to the monk. In a letter written before he left he stressed that "anything I do on this trip will be absolutely nonpolitical. I have no intention of going anywhere near Vietnam."[26] Just what might have been the character of Merton's writings had he returned from the Far East must remain, of course, pure speculation. There would seem to be no reason to believe, however, that Merton would have given up completely writing on social issues, for it is clear that he had not completely made up his mind concerning the role of the monk in society--his obligations toward it and the manner in which those obligations should be implemented.

There are two reasons why a discussion of Merton's mysticism is appropriate to a study of his social thought. The first is that--as we have already seen--he did not look upon mysticism as something utterly devoid of social implications; in fact, just the opposite was true. If the end of mysticism was union with God, union with God was unattainable without a greater love for and communion with other men. The second reason has to do with Merton's interest in Oriental mysticism. This interest was supplemented by an interest in Oriental culture, which he accepted as a favorable contrast to the Western culture which was found severely wanting in his estimate.

Was Thomas Merton a mystic? Such a question is not easy to answer, for many reasons, the most obvious of which is the ambiguity of the term "mystic." If the term is employed loosely--as is often done, for example, in literary criticism--to designate a person who believes in a reality which transcends the strictly empirical and who seem to display, through his writings, some degree of contact with that reality, then I do not hesitate to claim that Merton was a mystic. What is usually meant when the term is used in this loose sense is that we are dealing with a man with a lively intuitive sense. What is more, the mystic is one who takes a dramatically wholistic view of life and of history. Men and events are incorporated into a cosmic plan which, despite what reverses might be witnessed from time to time, will come to fruition in a transcendant reality the existence of which these men are fully convinced though they cannot explain. Again, in these respects, Merton was as fully a mystic as was Blake, Emerson or Whitman.

There is another, more technical use of the term "mystic," however, a use which one can not logically avoid applying to Merton because it is closely associated with the Christian monastic tradition to which he belonged. Dom Cuthbert Butler, in his classical work Western Mysticism, says that a "mystic", in the tradition of western civilization, is one who claims to have experienced or established a direct, conscious, objective contact, relation, or intuition of Transcendental Reality. "And so the mystic's claim is expressed by Christian mystics as 'the experimental perception of God's presence and Being', and especially 'union with God'--a union, that is, not merely psychological, in conforming the will to God's will, but it may be said, ontological of the soul with God, spirit with Spirit. And they declare that the experience is a momentary foretaste of the bliss of heaven."[27]

Merton never made any direct claim to the types of experiences described above. It is possible, however, to pick out certain passages in his writings and interpret them as indirect claims of mystical experience. One such passage occurs in The Seven Storey Mountain. Merton talks about something which happened to him while attending mass at the church of St. Francis in Havana, Cuba--"an awareness, an understanding, a realization."

> But what a thing it was, this awareness: it was so intangible, and yet it struck me like a thunderclap. It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience.[28]

In noting Merton's apparent difficulty in finding words adequately to describe his experience attention is drawn to another of what Cuthbert Butler considers a common characteristic of mystics: the problem they have of expressing what they felt to be basically an incommunicable experience. "The obscurity and apparent extravagance of their language," Butler says, "is due to their courage in struggling with the barriers and limitations of human thought and language in order to describe in some fashion what they experienced in the height of the mystic state."[29]

Although he made no direct claims to mystical experience, such experience was something which he unambiguously sought. It was, as a member of a contemplative order, literally his profession to seek the union with God which is the goal of the mystics. He was fully aware, however, of the vagaries and pitfalls in that search. It was easy to be deceived. What one might deem to be a mystical experience could in reality be the product of a super-charged imagination. But even if one had had a genuine mystical experience, there was always the danger of a resulting spiritual pride which would negate what good effects that experience could have. This danger, in turn, would explain the reluctance of certain mystics to divulge their experiences. At any rate, Merton valued that species of spiritual poverty which sought nothing, not even extraordinary spiritual experience. To him the surest way to attain to the ultimate, inseparable, union with God was to travel an ordinary path devoid of special occurrences. He expresses this notion in his poem "When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple. . . ."

> What choice remains?
> Well, to be ordinary is not a choice:
> It is the usual freedom
> Of men without visions.[30]

This is the way of spiritual emptiness, wherein a man seeks God in darkness and is sustained by a belief in God's presence by the experience of his absence.

Merton's general interest in mysticism prompted him to embark upon a study of Oriental mysticism and monasticism, as a result of which he came to be considered one of the foremost western authorities in this field. His studies were intensified at the time he was beginning to feel that his engagement in social activities had reached the peak of their usefulness and it was necessary to return to pursuits which he regarded as more in harmony with his monastic vocation. It is worth noting, however, that these studies had distinctly social implications. One of the reasons he became enamored with Zen, for example, is that he saw in the Oriental culture which produced it almost the direct antithesis to the western culture with which, to put it mildly, he had grown so impatient. Western culture had sold its soul for rank materialism. Oriental culture, on the other hand, still maintained an essentially spiritual orientation, although Merton saw danger for that culture and lamented the encroachment of western cultural values upon the East. He looked toward the Orient with great hope, and wrote to a Chinese priest: "I do not know if I have anything to offer to Asians but I am convinced that I have an immense amount to learn from Asia."[31] Merton's ecumenical excursion into Zen was, therefore, not only an attempt to bring to the attention of western religious men, monks especially, some of what he considered to be universally applicable religious truths to be found in Eastern religious traditions, but also, albeit indirectly, to propagate among a western audience a cultural ideal which he considered superior to that in which they were immersed.

In this study I have attempted to describe the development and delineate the mature status of Thomas

Merton's social thought. We have seen where Merton came of age, with respect to his social consciousness, as an undergraduate at Columbia. At this time, convinced that Communism provided the answers for the world's social ills, he had a tendency to think of mankind in terms of "the masses" and to regard social problems as solvable on a collective basis. With his conversion to Catholicism in 1938 he lost his old optimism for reform on a grand scale and began to emphasize the necessity of individual conversion. A prominent eschatological strain became apparent in his thinking, with the result that Merton at times seemed less concerned with the historical than with the post-historical status of mankind.

His mature period, which is roughly dated from 1960, is characterized by a renewed social consciousness in that it recalls his Communist stage. But Merton showed an intensity of involvement regarding specific issues such as war and race which had no earlier precedent. A part of his renewed social consciousness was his conviction that certain problems must be dealt with on large scale terms. He did not, however, relinguish his belief that all permanent social change must be based upon individual conversion, and many of the inconsistencies to be found within his mature thought are to be traced to his inability happily to resolve the tension between the individual and the community. This tension, illustrated by the two Mertons, the poet and the priest, was not entirely negative in its effects, however, for it produced much of the depth and richness of his social thought. His answers may not have been definitive, they may sometimes have been confusing, but the intellectual explorations he engaged in to find those answers were always exciting. A tentative resolution of the tension between the individual and the community was arrived at in Merton's philosophy of solitude. According to this view, the community is best served by true individuals, and true individuals are those who have come to the right discoveries about themselves through solitude. The individual and the community, though distinct, are not separate, and they should not be antagonistic to one another.

Despite the fact that his monastic life placed him decidely outside the mainstream of American society, Merton was a participant in and contributor to many important strains within that large, amorphous complex we refer to as American culture. His conversion, in its sociological aspects, was in the tradition of men like Jonathan Edwards, Joseph

Smith and T. S. Eliot, where a turning toward religion implies a reevaluation of one's society resulting in either a missionary's zeal to reform it or a recluse's desire to escape it. We noted the prominence of the anti-urbanism theme in his poetry. In this Merton showed his affinity with a long train of intellectuals, beginning with Thomas Jefferson, who have looked upon the city as a threat to the healthy working-out of the best possible life for the American people. As a poet, Merton shared in the romantic tradition which has had such a profound influence upon the growth and development of American poetry. With men like Emerson, Thoreau and Robinson Jeffers, he stood apart from his society and brought some rather severe judgments down upon it. As a monk, he was part of the communitarian tradition. The Trappists, like the advocates of Fourierism and the Shakers in times past and the Hutterians and the Amish today, have withdrawn from their larger society in order to strive toward the perfect community on a limited scale.

As an artist-intellectual, Merton was a representative man. The massive reawakening of artists-intellectuals to social realities which took place in this country during the 1960's was dramatically manifested in his life. On a larger, international level, he was among those men--D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, C. S. Lewis--who saw in the steady advance of technology a severe danger for the humanness of mankind. He shuddered at the transition from gemeinschaft to gessellschaft, the mass society, and the isolated individual suffering under the burden of his alienation. His advocacy of the individual was an instinctive reaction against the leveling tendencies of contemporary Western civilization.

A profound sense of the human underlay all Thomas Merton's social thought. He wanted mankind to survive, not merely as a species, not as a conglomerate of automotons, but as a community of persons. It was to this end that he lived and worked.

NOTES

[1] Merton, The Silent Life (New York, 1957), p. viii.

[2] Merton, Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality (Gethsemani, Ky., 1957), p. 5.

[3] Ibid., p. 5.

[4] Mulford Q. Sibley, "Oneida's Challenge to American Culture," in Studies in American Culture, Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie, eds. (Minneapolis, 1960), p. 41.

[5] For an interesting account of the Hutterians see Victor Peters, All Things Common: The Hutterian Way of Life (Minneapolis, 1965).

[6] Sibley, "Oneida's Challenge to American Culture." p. 49.

[7] Merton, "Answers for H. Lavin Cerda ("Punto Final")," August, 1967, unpublished in English.

[8] Merton, Monastic Life at Gethsemani (Gethsemani, Ky., 1965), non-paginated.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Brooks Atkinson, ed., Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau (New York, 1950), p. 121.

[11] Merton, Disputed Questions (New York, 1960), p. 181.

[12] Ibid., p. 184.

[13] Ibid., p. 184.

[14] Merton, Peace in the Post Christian Era, unpublished.

[15] Merton, Letter to friends, Easter 1968, unpublished.

[16] Merton, Letter to J. F. New York, unpublished.

[17] Merton, Letter to friends, Easter 1968, unpublished.

[18] Merton, Preface to Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, unpublished in English.

[19] Merton, Letter to friends, Septuagesima Sunday 1967, unpublished.

[20] Dorothy Day, "Thomas Merton, Trappist, 1915-1968," *The Catholic Worker*, XXXIV:10 (December 1968), p. 6.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 6.

[22] Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 145.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 145.

[24] Merton, Letter to J. F., New York, unpublished.

[25] Dorothy Day, "Thomas Merton, Trappist," p. 6.

[26] Merton, Letter to friends, Fall 1968, unpublished.

[27] Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (Harper Torchbooks ed., New York, 1966), pp. 4-5.

[28] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, 1948), p. 284.

[29] Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 5.

[30] Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York, 1957), p. 86.

[31] Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York, 1964), p. 287.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography contains all the published primary and secondary works which have figured directly or indirectly in my study. There are two major collections of unpublished Merton material, one at Bellarmine-Ursuline College, Louisville, Kentucky, the other in the private library of Sister M. Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S., Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sister Therese has indicated that her collection may eventually be transferred to the library of Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. The Bellarmine collection is particularly valuable for its letters, while that of Sister Therese, for its original manuscripts of published works. The University of Kentucky, Lexington has a small collection which features the correspondence between Merton and Boris Pasternak.

The major portion of the unpublished material used in this study came from the collection of Sister Therese; most of the remainder was given to me either by Father Merton or by his secretary, Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

I was aided considerably in my research by Frank Dell'Isola's bibliography (Thomas Merton: A Bibliography, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), which provides a complete listing and description of Merton literature up to 1956. Besides books and articles, its categories include secondary materials, translations (by Merton as well as those done of his work), unpublished material and juvenilia. Another very helpful bibliography was that compiled for the Thomas Merton Committee of Bellarmine-Ursuline College by Nancy Bizot and Paul Birkel. This work, employing the same general format of the Dell'Isola book, takes up where his leaves off and goes to 1963. Unfortunately, it is not published.

Merton founded and edited a literary quarterly in 1968, the year he died. The magazine, called Monks Pond and published at Gethsemani Abbey, Trappist, Kentucky, ran for only four issues, which was in accordance with the original plan. He contributed to it his own prose, poetry and photography. (Merton was an excellent photographer.) Among other contributors were Jack Kerouac, Wendell Barry, Robert Lax, Mark Van Doren and David Ignatow.

Two Merton titles are scheduled for posthumous publication. My Argument With the Gestapo, a novel which he wrote before he entered the monastery (its original title was The Journal of My Escape From the Nazis), will be published in July, 1969 by Doubleday. New Directions intends to publish a long poem entitled

"Geography of Lograire" in October, 1969. They also have indefinite plans for bringing out Merton's Collected Poems and his Asian Journal, probably in 1970.

No book has been written on Merton, few of the critical articles are truly critical, and none--except in a peripheral manner--deal with his social thought. Most of the best articles are those written on his poetry. Given the type of thinker he was, it is difficult to say exactly what type of reading would best prepare one for understanding his social thought. Very generally, it helps to have an acquaintance with Scholastic philosophy, with which Merton was thoroughly imbued. Many of the general themes of his social thought are illumined and put in perspective by three works authored by thinkers whom he admired and followed: Karl Jaspers, Man in the Modern Age, London, 1951; Gabriel Marcel, Man Against Mass Society, Chicago, 1952; and, Max Picard, The Flight From God, Chicago, 1951.

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